

## **On the Pedagogy of Examinations in Hong Kong**

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### Abstract

We present a portrayal of the pressures exerted on Hong Kong students by the examination system. However, the examination experience in China should not be confused with the contemporary emphasis on examinations in North American schools. We involve both teachers and students in experiential writing with respect to their experiences of examinations. These writings provide opportunity for reflections about pedagogical questions and dimensions of examinations in Hong Kong schools and society. We describe the historical background, the functions and the nature of examinations in Hong Kong. It is in the context of an awareness of such cultural traditions and present day global pressures that teachers (and their students) may gain a more thoughtful pedagogical perspective.

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Jill was a quiet schoolgirl of 15 who lived in an apartment near us. She worked very hard to be one of the few top students at school. But no matter how hard she tried, she just could not be the first in class.

Her Mum kept reminding her of how excellent her cousins had been doing and how her older brother had won different prizes. Actually, her academic performance was not bad. She was one of the top five in class over the past 3 years. However, her Mum never praised her.

One day before the exam results were released, she gave everything she had to her good friend, including a doll that had been with her for years. She wrote to her Mum and Dad apologizing for failing to be the "first in class." She then put on her school uniform claiming that she would go back to school. However, she would never reach school because she was found dead near her home on the same day. She plunged to her death from the top of the 32-storeyed building after slashing her wrist.

When her Mum received Jill's report card, she found that Jill had achieved "first" in her class. She finally had made it.

This is a recent account told by a Hong Kong student. People who have visited Hong Kong may have some appreciation of the dramatic reality of the story. Every year, Hong Kong newspapers carry reports of student suicide, coinciding with annual school examinations. Jumping from a high-rise window is a likely suicide method since virtually the entire Hong Kong population lives in dense and tall high-rise apartments.

There is little doubt that examinations are stressful for the students. A recent local survey reported that nearly 40% of the students experienced loss of sleep during examination time, with the situation becoming more serious for higher form students. They know that there is much at stake. And they learn this from early childhood. Notice the subtle realization that is contained in this childhood reminiscence from a Chinese teacher:

I don't remember much from my childhood but there is one event that I still distinctly remember from grade one. It has stayed with me all my life, for more than 40 years.

It was the end of the school year and the teacher had handed out nice prizes for all the students who had done well that year. Many students received prizes and the teacher gave me a sweet stuffed bear. When I came home I showed the bear to my father and told him that the teacher had given it to me because I had done such fine work.

But my father did not smile. He remained quiet. Then he said, "You received this prize because you are number 13." And he looked at me, and inquired softly, "Do you remember what student was the first one to get up? Now that student is number 1."

I looked into my father's face and felt very strange.

From then on my prize was not sweet any longer. That day I had gained a whole different understanding of school.

Traditionally, Chinese parents attach great importance to education and academic achievement (Ho, 1986). Education is seen as a main vehicle for social mobility, especially for those who fled to Hong Kong from the mainland after WWII. Also important is the belief that achievement is essentially a matter of effort, not ability. The malleability of human behaviour is known as one of the fundamental precepts of Confucianism (Munro, 1977). As the Chinese proverb puts it: "With

diligence, you can grind an iron bar into a needle.” There is also widespread belief that such a view of achievement marks the difference between Asian and Western cultures. In America, failure is more likely to be attributed to the lack of ability rather than a shortfall in effort (Stevenson and Lee, 1990; Hau and Salili, 1991).

Besides frequent tests and examinations, most schools believe that homework plays an important part in helping “to grind the iron bar into a needle.” Where schools do not set an amount of homework that parents deem sufficient, the children will be sent to after-school tutorial classes that do. Going to school after school is so common that parents often feel that their children would be disadvantaged if they do not enrol them in extra tutorials. The kind of harshness and helplessness that children feel in coping with the stresses of such demands is well shown by the following taken from a suicide note of a 10-year-old boy:

Everyday, there is a lot of homework. It is not only in large quantity, but also difficult to do. Each recess lasts only for 10 minutes. If there is an extra holiday, then I am given 10 more pieces of homework. Especially during long vacation, the homework piles up. There is no day to relax. Dictation, quizzes, and examinations become more frequent. Even after midnight I am still doing and revising homework. Usually, I can't go to bed until 1 o'clock. Then, at 6:50 in the morning, I have to get up again.

I am so tired. I don't want any more studying.

People in the west are horrified when they hear such stories about examination pressure and suicide among Asian students. However, suicide among Hong Kong students is no higher than among young people from other cultures. In fact, the overall rate of youth suicide in Hong Kong is not as high as that in many western countries where a higher prevalence of drug and substance abuse and mental illness among youths are seen as the main factors (Rich, Young & Fowler, 1986; Yip, 1998). But there is no denying that there is a clear cyclical trend and that May, June and July are the peak suicide months coinciding with the time when most public examinations are held and candidates' results disclosed. Although there is no direct evidence available to prove that examination pressure is the major cause of youth suicide, it nevertheless seems to be one of the precipitating stressors. As we are writing this article, in the month of May, 2001, two students, both high achievers in their own schools, killed themselves on the evening prior to a scheduled examination the next morning.

There are complicating factors in the issue of examination and student stress. The same local survey conducted on secondary school students' views on examinations (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 1997) shows that the testing culture has successfully bred a sizable proportion of students who would agree that the stress from examinations is self-imposed (38%) or due to parental aspirations (27%), rather than due to examinations being held too often or being too difficult. It would seem that students too have internalised the cultural values and beliefs about the nature of knowledge and learning. They have become part of the examination system: 45% of the students said that examinations are the best way to assess one's performance.

The survey also shows that Hong Kong students are examination smart. To prepare for examinations, 42 % of the students said they formed study groups with classmates, 35% said

they revised past examination papers, 16% tried to guess examination questions, and about 10% admitted that they had tried to cheat in examinations. Many students (40% of the respondents) reported that they studied for more than 6 hours per day during examination periods.

However, it would be wrong to equate the examination experiences of Chinese students with the examination trends that are currently dominating the curricula of North American educational systems. In North America the examination phenomena is the result of changing orientations to a market driven and production oriented trends of corporate values imported into the educational structures. But the examination systems in China have a long history and examinations are woven tightly into the Chinese attitudes toward studiousness, scholarship and traditional epistemologies of learning. It is important for Chinese educators to understand the context and background of their practices and not simply echo the criticism of examination driven curricula by North American educational critics.

### **The history of examinations in China**

Examinations in China have a very long history. In 165 B.C. the Chinese had already instituted a system for selecting government officials that was based on recommendations and examinations. During the Sui dynasty, A.D.581-618 there had developed an open and competitive system of examinations that made it possible for almost all males from all social strata to acquire official posts and even rise to the badge of distinction by passing a number of examinations set at different levels.

Except for some minor interruptions, the examination system was in place throughout Chinese history. It was almost impossible to gain high positions in government and politics without passing the relevant examinations. What was examined, however, changed through time. Initially, most examinations required compositions of poems, articles on state affairs and essays on the Confucian classics and history. However, in time the curriculum degenerated into the so-called *ba-gu* (eight-legged) format which was invented in 1487. Since then the *ba-gu* became the sole content of examinations, requiring only essay writing in a certain fixed form. *Ba-gu* was viewed as one of the most limited yet demanding forms of examinations that channelled the intellectual abilities into a literary contest of regurgitation and writing in strictly conventional formats.

What was it like to take an examination in old China? A well-known scholar, Pu Sung-ling (1640 – 1715), who himself failed numerous times in the provincial examinations, mockingly describes the seven transformations of a candidate:

When he first enters the examination compound and walks along, panting under his heavy load of luggage, he is just like a beggar. Next, while undergoing the personal body search and being scolded by the clerks and shouted at by the soldiers, he is just like a prisoner. When he finally enters his [examination] cell ... stretches his neck to peer out, he is just like a larva of a bee. When the examination is finished at last and he leaves...he is just like a sick bird that has been released from a cage. While he is wondering when the results will be

announced...his restlessness is like that of a monkey on a leash. When at last the results are announced and he has definitely failed, he loses his vitality like one dead, rolls over on his side... like a poisoned fly. Then, when he pulls himself together and stands up, he is provoked by every sight and sound, gradually flings away everything within his reach, and complains of the illiteracy of the examiners. When he calms down at last, he finds everything in the room broken. At this time he is like a pigeon smashing its own precious eggs. These are the seven transformations of a candidate. (Quoted in Miyazaki, 1976, pp. 57, 58)

Despite such early critiques, examinations have built themselves into the social fabric of the Chinese society. The preparation for the competition in the examinations typically required many years of study. For some they lasted from youth to old age. But as the saying goes, "The house built in gold can be found in books, the lady whose countenance is fair as jade can also be found in books." The examinations make promises of the good life that keep students from all walks of life studying their books.

### **The Hong Kong scenario**

Hong Kong was under British rule from 1842 to 1997. During this period, it grew from a small fishing village into a city of over 6 million inhabitants, with half of its work force engaged in trade and finance related occupations. Hong Kong is often portrayed as a meeting place of East and West. However, the population is predominantly Chinese (95%, 1999 figure) and Hong Kong society has maintained strong traditional Chinese values.

The Hong Kong education system is well known for being highly selective, and much of the selection is conducted within an examination system that employs a series of formal, external and norm-referenced assessments based on a uniform curriculum for all. An independent Examinations Authority (HKEA) administers the formal examinations. The HKEA is modelled on the British system such as the Cambridge and London Examinations Boards. By the way, Tseng (1966) has noted that the British originally learnt and adopted the examination system from the Chinese, and set up their competitive examination system for the selection of civil servants that began in 1855. Similar selection systems were also found in Australia and the U. K. in the 1960s and 1970s. These countries have since moved towards curriculum differentiation while Hong Kong has kept only one curriculum for all bands (see Biggs, 1996).

The examination-driven nature of the education system was well expressed by an OECD review panel appointed by the government in 1982. In its report, it describes Hong Kong schools as having "obsessive concern" with testing (OECD, 1982). When exiting from secondary school, a child would have gone through a total of eight major selection examinations -- from interviews for gaining admission to prestigious kindergartens to the Advanced Level Examination at the end of Secondary 7. Each of these examination hurdles had an impact on the opening up or closing off of certain options for the child at his or her next level of schooling. As a consequence, examinations determine the quality of the educational experiences of teachers and students.

Biggs found that at all stages, “the curriculum, teaching methods, and student study methods, are focused on the next major assessment hurdles” (Biggs, 1996, p.5).

It is true that since 1982, the number of public examinations in Hong Kong has been dramatically reduced. Nominally, only two public examinations remain, one at the end of Secondary 5 and the other Secondary 7 (the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination respectively). However, the obsession with testing and examination for selection continues. At present pupils are rank-ordered by their school examination marks. The education authority moderates these marks in certain years according to the overall performance of the school, and gives the students band labels. These are then used to determine the secondary schools in which each student will be placed, and whether or not he or she can obtain a subsidized education after Secondary 3. It is not surprising that it is clear to both parents and students that every mark that is given counts.

The importance of tests and examinations can also be seen by the time spent on examinations and the frequency that they are administered in schools. Most Hong Kong schools have two end-of-term examinations and two mid-term uniform tests in a year, with each occupying about one week of school time during which normal classes are abandoned. Many schools also run a “revision week” prior to these examinations. Afterwards, there is “de-briefing” time when teachers show students the answers to the various examination papers. In addition, there are designated “weekly test periods” in the school’s timetable over normal term time, so that students are actually tested more frequently--a truly “spare the test and spoil the child” approach. A rough estimate is that about 20 percent of the term time (40 days out of the 220 teaching days a year) is spent on examinations (preparation and writing/oral). A local survey shows that on average, secondary school students have three tests per week (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 1998).

### **The official curriculum and the exam curriculum**

Officially the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) is the designated curriculum making body in Hong Kong. It has the responsibility of translating the government’s educational policy into curriculum content. The Council publishes curriculum guidelines that must be implemented in schools for every subject at each level. But every teacher and student knows that in practice it is the examination syllabus published by the Examinations Authority that really matters. Wherever the CDC guideline differs from the examination syllabus, it is the examination syllabus that will be followed. As the Secretary of the HKEA observes, “In fact, students sometimes stop their teacher from teaching certain topics or materials which are not in the [examination] syllabus” (Choi, 1999, p.412).

The official curriculum guidelines prescribe high quality objectives such as intellectual, communicative, social and moral, personal and physical, and aesthetic development (CDC 1993). But everyone knows that it is the examination grade that counts. The examination syllabi published by the Examinations Authority do include high order skills such as application and

analysis. Yet, paradoxically, the heavy emphasis that is placed on examination grades has made it very difficult for higher order thinking to be assessed. The highly selective nature of the examination has forced examiners to put fairness and objectivity of marking above all other concerns. And to achieve maximum fairness, grades are based on objective scoring of quantifiable elements. This partly explains the popularity of tests using mainly multiple-choice items. Even in the so-called essay-type papers, markers are instructed to score answers according to a common “scheme” that contains all the “correct or acceptable” content points, while higher cognitive skills such as analysis, logic, argumentation, and style is often treated only as a possible or marginal “bonus point”.

Teachers and students are constrained maximizers. The backwash effect of examination driven teaching and learning practice is that both teachers and students soon figure out that “good” answers are those that can be “nailed” with a parade of “points” rather than answers with carefully structured arguments. Both teachers and students learn that even when a particular question asks for “discussion” or “evaluation” the script markers are actually looking neither for organization of arguments nor for expression of personal understanding (Pong, 1986). The actual practice of grading the examination papers conveys to teachers and students a view of knowledge that is static, circumscribed by “points” and to be learnt for regurgitation at appropriate moments.

As most public examinations take place in the months of April and May, most schools finish teaching examination classes by January or February, so as to allow a large block of time for coaching activities such as going over past examination papers, analyses of marking schemes (provided by the Examinations Authority supposedly only for teachers’ reference), study of recent trends of examination questions and question spotting. Almost without exception, schools run “mock” examinations in their own school halls for those who are about to sit for the “real” examinations. Schools do this to familiarize students with the examination formats as well as the sitting arrangements.

Some teachers become very skilled at helping their students prepare for the examinations. Here is an open letter sent in by a Secondary 5 student to a local Chinese newspaper, praising her teacher for providing helpful “points” in successfully dealing with examination questions:

Thanking a teacher from the bottom of my heart --

I am a HKCEE candidate of the current year. The exams are now over and my exam results are released. I am very satisfied with my grades. I did unexpectedly well in economics, so I would like to thank my economics teacher here. ...

I found the examination notes produced by my economics teacher extremely useful. They contain plenty of points that I cannot find in my textbook. She must have spent a lot of time in preparing them, and she must have copied them from numerous reference books. Furthermore, she spent much time in analyzing past exam papers for us, and gave us some good exercises based on them, so that we had the opportunity to be exposed to different types of questions.

I am very lucky to have such a good teacher.

(Published in a Chinese newspaper, Ming Pao, 1995)

The examination year is also the time for students to take extra lessons from the private “crammer” schools. These compete for fees on the basis of the conciseness and effectiveness of their prepared notes, on the examination success rates of past students, as well as on the level of qualifications of their tutors, such as whether they have served as markers or examiners at the relevant public examinations. There have been recent incidents where some of these tutors were questioned or even prosecuted for criminal offences as they were alleged to have disclosed “real” examination questions to their students.

Thus, it is obvious that the emphasis on examinations and testing creates all kinds of pressures. And examination pressure is a concern to educators, parents and the general public. Most educational research and reform efforts have been directed towards designing better curricula and more effective assessment mechanisms. But they have failed to address deeper issues regarding the quality of pedagogical practices in schools. Little research has been done that reveals how teachers and students actually experience examinations.

### **An experiential approach to the study of examination**

From September 2000 to April 2001, we carried out a small-scale study aimed at exploring, through the use of experiential writings, the lived experiences teachers and students (see van Manen, 1999). Teachers and students were asked to recall and write a particular moment of an examination experience. Here follows a reminiscence by a young adult university researcher when she was still a school student. She writes the experience as she remembers it happening:

I remember the day when Miss Wong, my English teacher, was returning the dictation exams. It actually happened many times like this.

“Liz!” Miss Wong says. I stand up, and walk slowly towards the teacher’s desk. My heart beats fast. Miss Wong passes my dictation book to me. But I dare not open it. I am afraid that I do not have a good mark. Whenever I receive a failing mark my father gets angry and beats me. The passing mark of the dictation is 60. If I get a mark of 55, then he will hit me 5 times--the difference between the passing mark and my mark.

I breathe deeply, trying my best to keep calm. Then I turn over the first page. My heart sinks. My mark is only 40. Oh, my God, I have studied hard but my performance is so poor. Why? What is wrong with me? Panic comes over me. I try to hold back my tears. I do not want my classmates to notice that I am sobbing.

Miss Wong tells me that I have to show my parents and let them sign the dictation book.

When I get home, my parents are already there. I can feel my heart beating very fast again. I take out my dictation book and pass it to my father. He opens it and glares at me. Then, without saying a word, he takes out the long wooden ruler from his room.



He stands in front of me and says, "I do not hit your right hand! You need it to do your homework. Open your left hand! 20 strokes!" He makes me open my left hand.

And then he beats me.

Tears pour down my face.

When this person read her experiential account to our group she broke down. She admitted that recalling the pressures that she experienced still pains her. What tortures her is not merely the harsh punishment by her father. She feels that her father was concerned about her future and keen to teach her the importance of hard work. His fierce demand on her to succeed was something she just could not live up to. Her father did not understand that it was not laziness or lack of effort and hard work that made her fail. It is obvious that there are deep epistemological sensibilities implicated in this story.

Hong Kong students understand that being "good" is not good enough. They must be "the best" in order to succeed. But the system is pyramidal, only one student can be at the top in each class or school. With the strong emphasis on test and examination scores there is a prevailing view of learning as competitive. Each student measures himself or herself against others and not against him- or herself. Grades are therefore not so much for self-fulfilment, but a main source of recognition that assigns each person a place in relation to others.

While the pressures of examination can be very problematic for students, for other students these pressures are actually enjoyable. Like top athletes they enjoy the contest and the social recognition it provides. Even if good grades are obtained not entirely in a "graceful" manner, it is the final standing that gives the distinction. Here an experienced teacher tells of an examination incident from her own student years:

"Hush! Mrs Leung is coming. She has got our exam papers!"

All the girls fall back into place as Sandra, our sentry, whispers out her warnings. I have a feeling of excitement and tension. This is the moment that I have been waiting for, the return of our first English exam paper in grade 9.

Mrs Leung starts to hand out the papers. It is her practice to rank order the students, and keep papers in the same mark range in bundles. First the papers with marks in the fifties go out, then the sixties, etc. We all keep our fingers crossed that our names will not be called too soon. Finally, we come to the nineties and there are only a few papers in the pile.

"Mary, well done," says Mrs Leung. So, Mary who usually gets the top marks has been called. Next is Kim, who is always the apple of the teacher's eye. I try hard to conceal a secret smile of satisfaction.

Finally, when my name is called, Mrs Leung pauses and announces to the whole class, "I am really very impressed with Kathy's work. She is the only girl who got 100% correct on section II of the paper, the comprehension section. Well done Kathy!"

All eyes are on me now.

"Good work, Kathy!" "Congratulations!"

I receive my paper amidst the clapping of hands. This is the moment I have been waiting for since the beginning of the year: the invisible, quiet little girl suddenly glows and becomes visible. The same happens year after year. At first teachers only notice the more vocal girls. For too long I feel that I have been ignored but now I have regained my rightful place among the "elites."

Then, alas! I see it: the answer to the third question, the 's' for the third person singular is missing from one of the verbs! My exam paper is not 100% correct! I am panic-stricken.

I steal a glance at Diana sitting next to me. Has she noticed my mistake? All the girls are either busy checking their own marks or trying to argue for more with the teacher. My mind is a total blank.

“Now I have to collect your exam paper again. Please pass them up,” says Mrs Leung.

In the confusion, I pick up my pen and add a little ‘s’ to fill in the missing bit.

The pressures exerted by examinations not only places stress on student’s sense of self-worth, they also press perfectly sincere students into doing things that they do not want to acknowledge. In an earlier draft of the above anecdote she had this last line: “Then I looked at Mrs. Leung again, feeling relieved for her.”

The chance aspect of the competitive nature of examinations is revealed in the following story written by a grade 12 student about his recent experience of an oral examination. As is common practice in English language courses for Chinese Hong Kong students, the examination is arranged in a small group discussion format (of four students). Each student is challenged to outdo the others in taking leads in the oral discussion test.

The oral exam discussion is about to start. I am so nervous about it since the result of the HK Certificate of Education Exam will have a decisive influence on my future. During the preparation time, I am thinking of how to start the discussion since I will be given rewards for initiating the discussion.

There are only a few seconds left for the discussion to start. What should I say for the first sentence?

I keep tossing some phrases in my mind: “Ok, let’s get started, shall we?” This sentence seems to be too common. It lacks personal style. “Well, I am glad to meet you everybody. Let’s...” This one seems not bad.

The examiner begins just after I have made up my mind. Words are almost at the tip of my tongue....

The examiner says, “I am happy to meet you everybody. Let’s get started. Today, we are here to...” The discussion starts right away. And before I can recover another group member has already spoken first!

Darn, he has torpedoed all my intentions.

For the next five minutes, the kid keeps on talking and talking. I have no chance to express my opinions at all.

When, a few months later, I receive the oral exam result, it is no wonder that I get a “D” grade for the oral part.

I really hate that guy who stole a march on me.

This story shows not only how students are pitted against each other but also how success at the oral examination depends as much on luck, aggressiveness, and strategy as on actual language competence. In fact, some teachers teach students social strategies that will give them the edge in such oral examinations.

The following teacher anecdote is concerned with the same type of oral examination setting. It reveals the heavy reliance on memory and learning of stock phrases that students use to prepare for the oral examination. Here a Hong Kong English teacher writes how such oral examination is experienced by the teacher.

I pass out the oral exam sheets to four of my Chinese students in our Hong Kong High School. It is an English language test. They seem tense. The exam

question reads, "Do you agree that students should spend at least two weeks of their summer holidays doing community work without pay?" Momentarily the students will be asked to discuss this question for purpose of showing their language proficiency in the oral examination.

I announce, "You have two minutes' preparation time, next you are given 12 minutes for the oral discussion."

For two minutes the room is dead silent, except for the rumbling air-conditioners.

"Okay, preparation time is up. You are now given 12 minutes for discussion."

Simon jumps in to start. He stammers at first, and then with distinct preparedness as if playing back a recording he rattles off his prepared line:

"All right, let us start if you do not mind. I think we have to clarify the topic. The topic is about..." He then reads every single word of the topic printed on the paper. Relieved that he had stolen the march, Simon then asks his fellow discussants cockily, "What do you think?" He seems very pleased with himself and beams with confidence.

Jenny nervously exchanges glances with Simon. She grips her question paper so tight that it crumples. Looking down and literally keeping her fingers crossed, she lisps her lines:

"I think it is necessary for students to..." Jenny also repeats the topic and rounds it off by saying, quite tersely, "...because it is good for the students!" She reads the final sentence with some assertiveness and then turns with a challenge to Paul. "What do you think?"

Paul knows it has to be his turn to speak. He closes his eyes for a couple of seconds and then utters, "It is very good for the students because they can broaden their..." He pauses and then, as the word comes to him, he says, "horizons." He hesitantly continues, "...and it is very good because they can keep...abreast of the time..." Paul then pauses again, obviously lost in recalling more stock phrases from memory. He scratches his head and glances at my face. I nod, acknowledging his glance. Encouraged by my nodding he continues with uttering more memorized phrases: "It is also good for the students because students can...turn over a new leaf!"

"Turn over a new leaf? How come?" I ask in a non-understanding tone. However, Paul looks very pleased with his success of having rattled off another few lines, and he ignores my query. Instead he looks at Mike and gleefully says, "Mike, what do you think?"

Mike is caught off guard for a few seconds and then, as Jenny had done, in an obvious attempt to save time, he repeats the entire topic again. Next he pauses for quite a while. But then he suddenly looks up with a smile, as if a light has gone on, and he churns out a memorized list of student activities at school. From his tone of voice it is obvious that he hardly knows what he is saying. The lines have little relevance to the discussion.

I suppress a puzzled look on my face. The other students then respond with statements related to the activities. The "English discussion" has become digressive and makes little sense.

Then the timer beeps and, saved by the clock, the students heave a sigh of relieve. They quickly run out of the room.

Outside in the hallway, they continue their "discussion." In Chinese! They are very audible and strangely eloquent. The exchanges seem natural with good phrasing and supporting cases.

I shake my head.

As in the above story, a teacher describes what he felt as he and his grade 11 students go through a dictation test. Both the teacher and the students seem helpless in challenging what is in store for them. They must follow a practice that they do not like but seem unable to change.

When I distribute the single test papers to the students, they cast pleading eyes, begging me not to give the dictation. I say “no” in a stern tone. Some boo, some sigh, and some deadpan with sarcasm.

As soon as the students receive the paper they set the pen on it right away as if their memory might fail them the next moment. They scribble their words very fast, labouring hard to reproduce what they crammed into their head the night before. Some mutter and a few squint their eyes in an apparent effort to peek at the work of others.

“Mr Chiu, will we be punished if we misspell the same word?” Thomas asks.

“No,” I try to be lenient towards them.

“Mr Chiu, my neighbour is too noisy. He is talking to himself.”

“David, stop the noise,” I say.

“I am just helping myself to remember better,” he retorts.

“Quiet! You must not disturb your classmates,” I warn him.

David purses his lips, and looks at me with annoyance. I take it in my stride and continue my invigilation.

After 20 minutes pass I announce that “time is up.” The students throw their pens down, heaving a collective sigh of relief. Once they rid themselves of the tension, they are so carefree as if all the dictation paragraphs that they have been learning by rote the night before are instantly discarded without trace.

### **Pedagogical reflection on the lived experience of examination**

It would appear that most of the above stories show negative aspects of the examination system and its excessive pressures on students and their teachers. We understand that there could also be stories that tell the brighter side of the affair, for example, how students and teachers can occasionally turn their tests and examinations into something positive, something that promotes growth on both sides. We would agree that a certain level and kind of pressure might not only be necessary but also desirable for spurring young people on to achieve what they want to achieve.

Yet, from a pedagogical point of view, it can be argued that there are values embedded in our conventional practices that allow adults to ignore the stresses and quality of students' lived experience, and turn a deaf ear to their problems and difficulties. For this reason we must find ways to listen to our young people and to find a language and vocabulary to understand their experiences. We have found that writing descriptions about examination experiences opens up new opportunities for students and teachers to reflect on these experiences and discuss their possible pedagogical implications and significances. These writings also provide opportunity for reflections about pedagogical questions and cultural dimensions of examinations in Hong Kong schools and society. Both teachers and students can benefit from an increased awareness of the historical background, the economic functions and the cultural nature of examinations in Hong Kong. It is in the context of an awareness of such cultural traditions and present day global pressures that teachers (and their students) may gain a more thoughtful pedagogical perspective on examinations and an understanding of the direction in which schools should be moving with regards to the issue of examination pressures.

One corollary that can be drawn from our brief study is that when taking the perspective of the meaning of the child experience it appears that the local culture puts too much stress on what is in the *future* of the child and ignores his or her *present* being and lifeworld. Teachers who

are more sensitive to the significance, meaning, and quality of student learning and school experiences are challenged to be able to make interpretive sense of particular and contingent classroom situations. This pedagogical challenge poses new demands on the question of teacher professionalism. Teacher professionalism is currently too much caught up in formal regulations and instructional institutional roles and management competencies.

It is in this context that we find that van Manen's (1991) notion of pedagogical tact is most pertinent. He points out that tactful action is an immediate and interpretive involvement in situations where the teacher instantaneously acts and responds, as a whole person, to everyday unexpected and unpredictable classroom situations. There are no situation-proof rules and recipes to replace the teachers' professional pedagogical abilities. Pedagogical tact is a relational and improvisational skill that orients teachers to "preserve a child's space, protect what is vulnerable, prevent hurt, make whole what is broken, strengthen what is good, enhance what is unique, and sponsor personal growth" (van Manen, 1991, p. 161). However well-intentioned teachers are in helping students to overcome the examination hurdles, we believe that they must orient themselves to engage in inter-subjectivity with children by having a grasp of their lifeworlds, so that they can help them on their own terms whilst not losing sight of what is best for them.

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