11. The Meaning of Good and Bad

When one lives in a Colony like Hong Kong, one finds many things being corrupted, even the English language itself. Words take on a new meaning. That perfectly hospitable practice of drinking tea conveys a completely bad and certainly not hospitable meaning here. Values become confused.

So when one talks of "good" schools and "bad" schools, one needs to explain the meaning of these two words in the Hong Kong context. A "good" school is one that has a fine building, a smart uniform, teachers with local "paper qualifications", adequate equipment to show if not to use, Government aid in one form or another, first choice in recruiting the examination-paper type of student, and above all, an almost flawless record of examination passes. Privileged as they are in every way, it would be surprising if they did not have first-class results in examinations.

However, that is only one side of a "good school", the side that is seen by the public and especially by the Government. There is another side seen only by the student and the parents.

An English friend who wanted to send her four-year-old daughter to the kindergarten of a "good" school spent many months beforehand coaching her baby to count and say her letters, to enable her to pass the entrance examination to the kindergarten. So a child must be a certain "examination passer" from birth, to study in such a privileged
school.

In a "good" school, a child is sure of having a "good" education, unhindered by the drag of having average of below-average children in the same class. The teachers in those schools know little of the headache of trying to teach backward or even average children to reach the same educational status as those attending privileged schools. Looking at examination results alone, those teachers may not realise how much harder it is to teach in what they may derisively call "school factories". But the teachers in the "factories" know that they are teaching a syllabus far beyond the ability of the pupils, because the examination is based upon the ability of the passers at the eleven plus examination, the only ones for whom the Government prepares any post-primary education.

If by any chance an average or below-average child gets into one of the "good" schools, he may (depending upon the particular school as there are some who put other things first) be thrown out as a failure. It has been known for children to demonstrate against being thrown out of a school "because our school keeps a high standard". One might ask, high standard of what? No one in authority heeds the cry of the children. If any of them in future go out to throw stones on the streets to express their frustrations, they will be called "hooligans". The Riot Commission of 1966 uncovered the educational background of some of these throw-outs, but drove them to greater despair by permitting them to be framed, beaten up, jailed,
made to appear liars.

In contrast to a "good" school, a school labelled "bad" usually has only rented premises, perhaps an old tenement whose landlord is counting the students to see how much he can manage to squeeze from their fees. Not all landlords are so bad, but there is no control on rent if the buildings are used as schools, and at a time of building boom the greed of some landlords knows no bounds. Once every six months they will send out notices to quit, to be followed a few days later with an offer "Without prejudice" of a further unspecified term of tenancy at a greatly increased rent. Very few landlords will agree to giving a fixed lease.

The "bad" schools have other difficulties to face. When the pupils reach the age of twelve, if they show any promise of success and can pass the eleven plus examination, they are offered places in Government and Government aided schools, leaving the "bad" schools to cope with the rest.

Without any Government assistance, the "bad" schools cannot afford to employ the same level of documented teachers. To cap all, the "bad" schools have to charge higher fees than the "good" ones, to meet the bill for the landlord and the teachers which "good" schools do not have to meet.

To add insult to injury, the "bad" schools then have to register with the Business Registration Department and display a Business Licence as well as their permit from the Education Department.
(Exceptions to this rule are a few schools incorporated as "non-profit-making"). A further insult is added when high Government officials repeatedly stand up in public and condemn the private schools for paying low wages and making "large profits". I have yet to see a primary school in a rented building making enough profit to permit either the teachers or the organisers to live as well as a Government school teacher. Those who make such utterances should examine their own salary scales!

Yes, the syllabus is the same, whether the school is labelled "good" or "bad". But the work of the teachers is very different: poorly paid, often less well trained, if they have a conscience for their work and a care for their pupils (and some of them do), they have to work much harder than their Government-paid counterparts to raise the standard of their pupils to the required examination level. While the "good" schools struggle to keep their records a clean 100% pass, the "bad" schools struggle to gain enough passes to retain their right of entry into the examination at all. In any case, the examination is "the thing"

Yet any real educator knows that it is the average or below-average student who is most in need of good education, with the best-trained teachers, the best aids and facilities: above-average students will make their way in less favourable circumstances.

Year after year can be heard the same pious platitudes at school graduation ceremonies. Official and
unofficial educators assure the students that other things are more important than examination passes. But the examination remains the be-all and end-all of school life, an issue of such importance that some students are prepared to commit suicide rather than face the world if they fail. The parents demand passes because this is what the system demands; they know that Government Departments will not yield one inch from their demand for at least five school certificate passes including English before they will offer a job with any prospects. A child is forced into the rat race from the beginning: he dare not fail an examination; if he does, he is marked out as a failure.

And what happens to those who are thrown out of the "good" schools because they cannot keep up the standard? No one seems to enquire. From lack of interest come discontent and unrest; some of our students are already suffering from unrest and frustration; some of them have already joined the ranks of the delinquents, the teddy-boys, the triads, the addicts and the prostitutes: they have found a world in which they can live up to the "standard" required.

It is an interesting exercise to interview some of these "throwouts": but it is rather sad. Here is a typical conversation between a rejected student and the headmaster of a school he is trying to enter:

Headmaster: "Why are you wanting to enter this school?"
Student: "Because my own school will not give
me a chance in Form 5”.

H: “Why not?”
S: “Because I failed in one subject in Form 4. I passed in all the other subjects but failed in this one by a few points.”

H: “Your record is good, and I notice that you have studied in your old school for many years. I see your conduct is good. Why will your school not allow you to drop that one subject in which you failed and study the ones you passed?”

S: “Well, you see, we have many Form 4 students, so the school must expel a lot of students to reduce the number in Form 5 as there are not many Form 5 classes.”

H: “That is a great pity. How do you feel about it?”

S: “I feel very unhappy, a failure, hopeless. I don’t know what to do because my parents have spent a lot of money on my education and they expect me to get my Certificate of Education and find a good job. Please give me a chance.”

If places are available, these students are given a chance in a “bad” school, and if the school has a conscience, many of them will pass. Many rejects from “good” schools do quite well and get credits, but the teachers have to work extra hard to give the students that extra push.

It is an indication of the wide gap between the privileged and underprivileged schools, that the former cannot risk their reputation by keeping any student who has a vague chance of failing in the
examination, while the latter cannot risk missing a student who has the vaguest chance of passing. And so the examination overshadows the child's life; it controls the school enrolment; it keeps the teachers tense for fear they should let the school down.

The "good" schools may benefit by losing a possible failure of a student, and the "bad" schools may benefit from gaining a possible passer. But what of the human beings so thrown around? What are the psychological effects of a young person being outcast from his mother school where he has studied with the same classmates for so many years?

I interrupted the writing of this chapter to interview one such student. When I examined his record, he pointed out that he had studied in his old school from Primary 4 to Form 4 (seven years), and then he had been told that his school had no further use for him as he was likely to fail in the Form 5 Government examination. I assured him that his chances of passing were good.

As I looked at this student's pleasant face I wondered whether his feeling of inferiority would have any permanent effect upon him. Would he ever feel any responsibility towards a community that had shown so little responsibility towards him? Would he be able to fit into his new class and feel one of the group, or would he just use his new school, as his old school had used him? Would he develop an anti-social attitude? Could I expect him to feel like one of our own students, or would he just come in order to get his name on the examination candi-
dates’ list? Who could blame him if he did all these things? It speaks well for our young people that they seldom feel a grudge against society.

Those who complain of the irresponsible attitude of some Hong Kong people towards the community should re-read this chapter and consider. Those who are responsible for our educational system should consider more than others. They should consider whether their demand for proficiency in a foreign language is a fair yardstick of ability. How many of them were good at science and not at language? If these authorities fail to face up to the challenges, they should at least try to understand if ever our young people should again take to the streets on the first issue that comes to hand.