

# A QUESTION OF MORALITY

Although values education is not part of the formal curriculum in Hong Kong, several schools have been moved to launch their own programmes, writes **Nora Tong**

Maths teacher Clovis Szeto Yat-chun, who heads up the moral and civic education committee at St. Stephen's College in Stanley, literally goes out of his way to teach his students the virtue of responsibility. Last year, he took the school's basketball and volleyball teams for a training session in Taiwan. At the end of the trip, they were doing a spot of shopping on the way to the airport, when Szeto received a call from staff at the dormitory where they had been staying, saying the students had left without cleaning up. The place was a mess.

"I was shocked when I saw the photos of the rooms the staff sent me," he says. "We decided to go back and tidy up the rooms. We were travelling from central Taiwan to Taipei on a coach and it took us a few hours to return to the dormitory. But it is important for our students to know that their actions bear consequences."

St Stephen's College is one of several schools in Hong Kong that have rolled out initiatives to instil virtues such as honesty, responsibility and empathy among students, even though values education is not part of the territory's formal curriculum.

Each year, Szeto and other members of the moral and civic



**Principal Carol Yang Ching and senior teacher Clovis Szeto Yat-chun are promoting ethical values at St Stephen's College.**  
Photo: Paul Yeung

education committee plan a series of activities around a theme such as "appreciation" or "passion". More than 15 programmes were organised last year to help students understand and care for people facing various kinds of disadvantage.

The students met people with hearing impairments and learnt some sign language and used

earplugs to gain a better understanding of what it is like to be deaf, and visited the charity Oxfam, where they learnt about the plight of cage-home dwellers. Afterwards they spoke about their experiences during school assembly.

Carol Yang Ching, principal of the Anglican college, says teaching morality is part of the everyday

fabric of its school life and involves all teaching staff.

"One of our teachers once saw a student being driven to school in a very luxurious vehicle and asked the student not to ride in that car to school again," she says.

"[And] do you notice the 'drop-off' sign [near the entrance of the school]? All students must get off

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the school bus or their cars at that point and walk up the campus themselves.”

About a third of St. Stephen's students are boarders. Yang says the boarding house is a good place to introduce and underpin the right values. To start with, the students have to greet one another and the teachers, when they line up in the corridor every morning.

“You have to be disciplined. You have to get up by yourself, make your own bed and do your homework. Some of our students help with installing furniture pieces like bookshelves,” says Yang, adding that a morally-sound person should respect not just the people, but also the history and the environment of their community.

Some schools have incorporated values education into their class schedule. At True Light Middle School of Hong Kong in Tai Hang, for example, all students in Form One and Two have to attend “life education” lessons. In addition to acquiring ways to adjust to life in the secondary school, such as time-management skills, and learning about the school's history, students are given plenty of opportunity to reflect on their notions of right and wrong.

“They are presented with moral dilemmas, such as ‘what do you do if you see your good friend cheating in a test’. They will then discuss their views, and those who want to express feelings or opinions privately can write down their thoughts at the end of the class [to be read by the teacher-in-charge or social workers],” says Leung Shuk-yi, who coordinates the classes. The school launched the life education classes a few years ago in the face of deteriorating moral standards among Form One students, she says.

“Many girls were the only child in their family and their parents were often too protective of them,” says Leung. “They were mostly concerned with their children's academic performance. We felt the



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CHERLYN IP CHEUK-LAM



True Light Middle School students attend a “life education” lesson to help them adjust to secondary school life. Photo: Paul Yeung

need to redress this imbalance.”

Vice-principal Kwong Man-wai says the classes teach students how to reach a decision when their priorities clash and come up with possible solutions to problems. The students have also become more empathetic.

“When we talk about bullying, they may wonder why the topic has prompted a few students to cry. They then realise the importance of trying to understand what others think,” she says.

Cherlyn Ip Cheuk-lam, a Form Three student at True Light, says she has developed a better understanding of herself, the community and the world from the life education classes.

“I have learnt how to decide what is right and wrong. These opportunities are as essential as academic lessons,” she says.

The school teaches values

through as many platforms as possible, including the morning assembly, homeroom sessions (short classes in the morning during which the class mistress chats with students about a certain topic), open forums and religious studies lessons.

Kwong says it is important to motivate her colleagues, to keep up the teaching of morality on top of the many other duties they have to perform. This can be achieved, for instance, by assigning two homeroom teachers to one class in order to ease the teaching and administrative load.

“We have formed a rather tight-knit community. I have chats with the teachers and offer assistance wherever possible. During staff meetings we don't censure teachers whose students behave poorly. We let them know they face challenges and show them our support.”

## Form Five faces ethics challenge

Consider this question: Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins says that life has no meaning except to pass on our genes... Do you agree?

Regardless of your answer, having contemplated the problem will have stretched your mind a little in terms of your understanding of life's big philosophical questions.

And this is what Brother Steve, principal of La Salle College, hoped his students had achieved after he enrolled them in an ethics seminar that included the question for discussion.

The one-day event was led by Dr Peter Vardy, author of titles such as *Ethics Matters* and former vice-principal of the University of London's Heythrop College, which specialises in philosophy and theology. Around 200 students, including 40 Form Five students from La Salle, attended the workshop.

The morning session saw Vardy presenting different periods of philosophical thought ranging from the Renaissance to Kant and post-modernism, followed by a workshop on the accumulation of wealth in the afternoon. The students had to apply the philosophical concepts they had learnt about in the morning, as they discussed the meaning of wealth, investment and consumerism, and analysed the relationship between ethics and capitalism.

“Ethics and philosophy is an important part of an all-round education. It is important for us to understand life, and it helps us to think, understand how one thinks and how thinking works,” says Brother Steve.

“Being aware of how you think indirectly helps you to become an organised critical thinker. Good minds need to be challenged and exercised in order to [foster] critical and free thinking,” he adds.