

Dr. X and Miss Y.

Last Saturday afternoon, I watched our A Grade football team play Tang King Po (Hong Kong) at the Happy Valley Sports Ground; a match that I am delighted to say we won. Afterwards, I caught the bus from Causeway Bay to Central. Sitting upstairs and trying to switch off to all the mobile telephone conversations, I was paying more attention than usual to the advertising signs outside. I noticed that across the back of the bus in front of me was a large photograph of a Dr. X and a caption that read “Hong Kong’s number one tutor of A-Level Mathematics”. Dr. X appeared to be a distinguished and friendly man with his broad smile, extremely white teeth, round spectacles and very smart suit. Almost immediately, a tram pulled up alongside my bus. Down the side of the tram was a large advertising banner that boldly stated “Miss Y, the top tutor of Mathematics in Hong Kong”. Miss Y also had a beautiful smile and unbelievably white teeth. How fortunate I was to have two people next to me, claiming to be the best Mathematics’ tutor in town.

The traffic was heavy that time of day and we made slow progress down Hennessey Road. At times the bus carrying Dr. X was in the lead, at other times it was Miss Y’s tram. When we stopped at the traffic lights in Wanchai, Dr. X and Miss Y were positioned right next to each other. I started thinking ‘who will get to Central first and claim the trophy as Hong Kong’s number one tutor’? I waited eagerly for the traffic lights to turn green. Unfortunately, however, I was not to find out. Soon after Admiralty, the bus branched to the left and headed up Cotton Tree Drive. The tram continued straight ahead. Dr. X and Miss Y were now traveling in opposite directions.

We would all agree that the 155th Anniversary Exhibition Day was a great success. I was very impressed with the quality of the work on display and the enthusiasm of the boys who were manning the counters. I had a very enjoyable day. I won a marshmallow for constructing a story using four randomly picked English words; I now understand how to extract DNA from a soybean; I feel more confident that the MTR Western Line will one day reach as far as Kennedy Town; and, I discovered what I must do in order to reach the Kingdom of Heaven. I also heard how loud the brass band is when it performs in the new Podium. I went home that evening with sweets, plastic document sleeves, polished stones, and enough beautifully designed bookmarks to place one in each page of the Lord of the Rings.

I hope that you also had a very enjoyable day at the Exhibition, that is, if you actually came along on the day. I first realised that something was not quite right when we were organising the displays the day before. On the College Calendar, that Friday is referred to as ‘The Day Preceding Exhibition Day’. Classes were suspended and great effort directed at setting up the displays and having everything ready for the big day. At 9.00am on Friday morning, however, the school was still almost empty. At 10.00am small groups of students were starting on the display boards, setting up experiments, constructing a rope bridge, rehearsing their musical items, and practicing their lines. At 2.00pm the pace had increased; at 5.00pm panic had set in; and at 9.00pm it was mostly completed. At midnight it was all quiet.

Yes, a truly magnificent effort; but not by all. We have 1100 boys in the College. However, we did not have 1100 boys helping on Friday nor did we have 1100 boys participating on Saturday. I heard that a number of teachers were struggling to find helpers. Thank goodness that some boys were involved in the setting of two or three displays. Without their extra contribution, a number of exhibits would not have been ready in time. So where were all the other boys? Clearly, a proportion of students simply treated Friday as a holiday; a bonus that comes along every five years. Of course, some boys would have been playing sport on Saturday. Another groups of boys stayed away on Saturday out of laziness rather than making the effort to support their College, their teachers and their classmates. Others boys, however, may have had appointments to see Dr. X and Miss Y; the gurus of Mathematics teaching in Hong Kong.

On the Friday before Exhibition Day, I was speaking to a conscientious and enthusiastic student in Form 5 who was working hard putting the final touches to his class's display board. He was justifiably proud of his efforts and had produced a colourful and striking exhibit containing a great deal of interesting and well-researched material. I congratulated him on his efforts and asked if he was looking forward to showing his work to the crowds on Exhibition Day. He looked down and somewhat apologetically said "I'm sorry sir, but I won't be here tomorrow". He then told me that he attends tutorial classes on Saturdays from 11.00am until 6.00pm. I told him that I understood his predicament. You see, his parents had already paid for the tutorial classes for the year and he would be missing out on the work covered if he chose to come to the Exhibition Day. He also told me that he must attend the tutorial classes because 'the tutors are really good at picking which questions will be in the Cert. Ed exams.'

I first came across the private tutoring industry a number of years ago when I was visiting high schools in Japan. I noticed that many boys and girls were falling asleep at school, usually during lessons but also at lunch time. The Principal told me that nearly all his students attend juku, that is, private tutorial classes after school and at weekends. Juku, often known as cram-schools, are where Japanese children are sent by worried parents hopeful that their son or daughter will get better examination scores. Over half of Japan's secondary school students go to juku, usually to study English and Japanese languages, Mathematics and Science. Juku are not only attended by high school students. Many primary school boys and girls also have private tuition in order to improve their chances of getting into 'the best' high schools. Shockingly, an increasing number of Kindergarten children are going to juku so that they can improve their chances of being selected by a 'good school' for entry into Primary One.

So why do so many Japanese children attend juku; and why do so many Hong Kong students have a weekly meeting with Dr. X and Miss Y? Of course, there are many arguments put forward as to why tutoring is not just important but absolutely essential. It is said that tutorial classes assist students keep up with the regular work at school and that this is big help to those who are falling behind the rest of the class. Tutorial classes are also seen as preparation for the public examinations. Others would say that tutorial classes enable students to make new friendships particularly with the teachers.

However, most tutorial classes are expensive and many families in Hong Kong simply cannot afford to enroll their children. Other tutorial classes are cheaper but taught in large lecture halls with many students. Indeed, some tutorial classes are held via television link, where one tutor can cover three or four classrooms at the same time. What is clear is that more and more Hong Kong families are putting aside money in their yearly budgets to pay for private tuition. The pressure is on the families to provide and on the children to perform.

Private tutoring is a multi-million dollar business here in Hong Kong, as it is Japan, the USA, the United Kingdom, Australia and many other countries. Private tutoring companies would not be in business if the income they received was not worth their while. But why is the phenomena of tutorial classes a relatively recent development? And what does it say about our College and our teachers? St. Paul's College has a richly deserved name in Hong Kong as one of the schools with the highest academic standards. Our alumni have done remarkably well over the years achieving excellent results in the Certificate of Education and at A-Level. Nearly all our graduates continue their education after they leave SPC. In the past, of course, they did this before anybody had thought about private tuition. I wonder what would happen to you, the alumni of the future, if you decided not to go to tutorial class?

I sincerely hope that we do not get to a situation that has been the experience in Japan where students sleep at school because in their mind the 'real work' starts later that afternoon when they arrive at juku. Or the situation where the only teachers that 'really count' are seen as being not the ones that work alongside you each day at school but the ones who you see briefly once or twice per week. It is important for me to say that your needs are served each and every day at this school. Please, never underestimate the importance of your class teachers in your education.

It is also time to get some balance into your lives. It is important that you work hard in all your lessons; study hard when you are completing homework; play hard as members of our sporting teams; practice hard as members of our musical groups. However, also find time to contribute fully to events such as the Exhibition Day, to participate in activities like the Sponsored Walk, to make new friendships, to play your part as an active student of SPC. You see, Dr. X and Miss Y will come and go but St. Paul's College is always here for you, today and tomorrow.

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