

Educator Leung Kee-cheong on how to end class struggle in Hong Kong (*SCMP* By Shirley Zhao 05 March, 2015)

1. Q: Can you single out one thing Hong Kong should do to improve its competitiveness?
A: We are producing students without creativity. The education system and society have to change. Hong Kong needs to change its education system. That is if it's serious about wanting more entrepreneurs to spur innovation and competition. Otherwise, money spent on start-ups is money poured down the drain.
2. This crushing indictment is not from a critic outside academia, but a celebrated educator, Leung Kee-cheong. Leung is principal of Fresh Fish Traders' School, a primary school well known for its success in turning around the lives of poor children.
3. "You need space to let creativity grow, but Hong Kong's spoon-feeding education has left children no time or space to use their imagination," he laments.
4. His comments follow Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying's proposals to add HK\$5 billion to the government's Innovation and Technology Fund and plough HK\$300 million into setting up a Youth Development Fund to help young entrepreneurs.
5. But Leung Kee-cheong says Hong Kong is grappling with low competitiveness in terms of creativity and start-ups not because of money but because students' desire for discovery and exploration has been stifled by academic pressures.
6. "The biggest fear for many Hong Kong people is losing out. For example, if your child joins five after-school activities, my child has to join six. There's no room for children to breathe." With schools so focused on exam results, Leung says Hong Kong's youth have been denied the ability to think independently and the desire to study issues deeply.
7. He says materialism is partly to blame for parents being so bent on ensuring their children do well academically. Hong Kong society continues to measure success purely in dollar terms. As a result, he says, most parents want to see their children in traditionally prestigious professions - doctor, lawyer, banker.
8. However, while Leung agrees that the government must act urgently on property prices, he takes a different view. He believes the students have been spoilt by their parents and lack the ability to think for themselves. "They do not want to study deeply into an issue," Leung adds, "and tend to follow what others have been doing. They don't understand about the 'one country, two systems' policy. They don't understand that Hong Kong has to realise democracy within the framework given by the central government, so that Beijing can be at ease and trust us."
9. He blames this lack of understanding on the schools' inadequate teaching of social values. "Most schools have not done enough in teaching students correct values such as sympathy, civic virtues, helping others, not being jealous and the ability to appreciate others. Instead, the schools have put the emphasis on exam scores and the rate of students entering good universities."

10. And even on the issue of property prices, Leung says young people, if they were imbued with the right thinking skills to be enterprising, would not let that hold them back from starting their own ventures; they would operate from home, for example, or look to rent space in the cheapest areas.
11. Leung also believes schools should strengthen national education to let students understand China as a whole. Notably, Leung's is the school where the city's first national education lessons were taught in 2012, while the now-abandoned compulsory introduction of the curriculum was stirring up outrage elsewhere. But he is not optimistic about national education taking off, even as he makes this call, as he says most schools just want to focus on students' academic performance.
12. He suggests a radical solution for a more holistic approach to education: the government should increase the number of funded places at its eight tertiary institutions from the current 12,000 to allow all those who qualify - almost 28,000 last year - the chance to pursue their higher education at home.
13. This would ease the pressure on them to fight for a place and enable a more rounded education. To the criticism that producing too many graduates could pose problems if there are no jobs, as has happened in some countries, Leung says the city's situation is different, adding that it has the mainland on its doorstep, spilling over with opportunities.
14. Leung adds that by easing academic competition, parents and schools can dedicate more time to developing students' characters, critical thinking, independence and creativity - qualities needed for a vibrant economy.
15. "Hong Kong students' ability in maths and reading is very high on world rankings, but they don't have much interest in maths and reading, because they are forced upon them," says Leung. "In America, there are many technology talents - because they are interested in it."
16. Leung's teaching philosophy is focused on developing students' critical thinking and leadership and communication skills without constant drilling to get ever-higher exam scores.
17. His primary school in Tai Kok Tsui, Kowloon, has been described as a legend in the education sector after Leung saved it from the verge of closure. He quit his job as a school development officer in the then Education and Manpower Bureau in 2002 to lead its battle against the authorities. The position of principal had been vacant for three years before he stepped in.
18. He protested, negotiated and raised funds, reversing the school's fortunes within five years. His own innovations included opening the school grounds at weekends so the pupils, many from the city's poorest families, could be supervised by teachers while their parents were working.
19. "You can't blame everything on others. You are your own future."