



TIMOTHY MCEVENJUE

School's



Arthur Tam explores why the education system in Hong Kong is intrinsically failing the LGBTI community

The direction in which education starts a man, will determine his future', said Plato. But what if an education system is designed to exclude certain students and educators? What then will become of these individuals? By now, it isn't news that many schools can be hostile environments for LGBTI youth, but it's a perennially underreported problem in Hong Kong, and one which can leave huge emotional scars on students. Back in 2010, the It Gets Better Project launched an international campaign to combat the pervasive issue of school bullying against LGBTI youth and to deter them from suicide, which studies have shown to be a disproportionately greater risk among the group. Not only students, but LGBTI teachers as well are subject to forms of bullying from their students, colleagues and sometimes by the entire administration.

This is an issue made apparent in our very own city last year when Mr Gay Hong Kong 2013 winner and educator Michael Morrill felt so severely discriminated at his school that he was forced to quit and leave the city altogether. Another notable incident occurred at the beginning of last year, when the International Christian School in Sha Tin imposed a controversial moral contract called the Standard of Biblical Ethics and Integrity, which banned gay and transgender teachers. The school said it wanted to uphold 'good Christian role models'. And, an

email sent from the administration and recruitment coordinator Sandy Burnett to a potential teaching candidate stated that they don't 'condone same-sex relationships, extramarital relationships [or] couples of the opposite sex living together outside of marriage. We are a Christian school. We have a right to our beliefs'.

We email the headmaster of ICS, John Nelson, and receive this response: 'I cannot respond to your questions at this time. In fact the school and its employees are not responding at this time to the press on these issues'. Legally, the ICS is within its rights to enforce this discriminatory policy, since there is no anti-discrimination law to protect sexual minorities and also because the school is privately funded and can't be pressured. We turn to the Education Bureau (EDB) to get their thoughts on the situation and are told that, since the incident, ICS has actually retracted their policy. "The EDB has reminded the school again that in formulating and reviewing its policies, reference should be made to the EDB Circular on the Principle of Equal Opportunities and the Code of Practice against Discrimination in Employment on the Grounds of Sexual Orientation," says a spokesperson.

"Religion casts a wide shadow in Hong Kong," says Dr Suen Yiu-tung, assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "And it's not far from fair to say

that it casts an even darker shadow on the education system." Recently Dr Suen conducted research on whether universities were a tolerant environment for LGBTI staff and students. She asked her respondents for photos for an exhibition to promote LGBTI awareness. One of her educator interviewees responded that he would not provide images as they were 'new here' and was 'not sure of the Hong Kong cultural

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context and potential consequences of being out where my colleague may notice'. "The power of Christianity in Hong Kong and in my department is important," added the interviewee. "A number of my most powerful colleagues are Christian. I can't help associating that with a potential to be traditional and the likelihood of homophobia and negative consequences that follow between my personal relationships with colleagues. It's too much to risk."

Just from glancing at the list of schools from the Education Bureau you'll discover that around half ►

the schools in Hong Kong have the words Saint, Catholic, Christian or Light in their name, which doesn't come as a surprise since a large part of Hong Kong's education system was established by missionaries during its colonial times.

"In my opinion, Christian beliefs should be treated carefully in public issues," says Reverend Po Kam-cheong of the Hong Kong Christian Council. "We need to determine the appropriateness when it comes to public schools. ICS, however, is a private school, so they weren't breaking the law [with their policy against gay teachers]."

There are many who would actually support a decision such as ICS's, according to a recent survey commissioned by Roger Wong (Scholarism leader Joshua Wong's father). Wong Senior is leader of the anti-gay group The Family School Sexual Orientation Discrimination Ordinance Concern Group. Out of the 611 respondents in Wong's survey, 68 percent believe that anti-gay views should be tolerated and under 49 percent believe that gay relationships should be recognised. However, it's easy to be sceptical when the three leading questions used in the survey are written out:

1. Should society pass a law that forces schools to teach the acceptance of homosexuality?

2. Should society pass laws that require everyone to accept homosexuality and prohibits the opposing voices?

3. Should society pass laws that prohibit schools from teaching non-acceptance of homosexuality?

"I am sceptical towards the results of this kind of survey from an individual organisation, not to mention the size of the pool," says Po. "Since there are preconceived pro or con opinions already going into this survey, it is biased. I think we should only pay attention to surveys conducted by organisations with more academic credibility, for objective results. Otherwise, it would be quite unfair to comment on anything when it did not reflect the truth."

One of the pervading questions that anti-gay groups ask – as seen in the survey – has to do with education and the fear of homosexuality being taught in schools. "First off, you cannot teach someone to be homosexual," says assistant professor Dr Denise Tang of the Department of Sociology at HKU. "I

do not see how anti-discrimination legislation can be taken to mean an education on homosexuality. It is not fear. It is plain homophobia. Talking about diverse sexualities, not only homosexuality, but also heterosexuality and positive sex education, is essential for young people. As an adult, I have learned a lot from young people. We should trust them as individuals who are capable of making their own choices and knowing who they are."

that are against LGBT issues." Religion, though, is still only part of the issue that plagues the education system and the LGBT community. Another factor comes from Chinese traditional values.

Neil – a gay teacher whose name we change as he wants to remain anonymous – is the head of visual and performance arts at an international school in HK. "Back when I was in London, the students, teachers and administration

branch of CCC (Church of Christ in China) schools. "The other teachers suspected that he was gay because he was soft spoken and effeminate, and during break time I heard them saying that the rash must be an STD." These occurrences are not uncommon. And it affects students, too. "Back when I was studying at a top Catholic school I would see other students being bullied and teachers would blame the student for causing a disturbance," Paul tells us.

“Sex education has not been treated in a serious manner”

Though Hong Kong has lots of high achieving students, there is one thing that Dr Tang points out that they are not properly taught about – sex. According to a survey by Bain & Company in 2012, more than 40 percent of local schools do not receive sex education from a third party provider, and in-house classes are usually inadequate. And with HIV on the rise in the city and a disproportionate amount of gay men being affected by the virus, AIDS Concern chief executive Andrew Chidgey says it's imperative to reform the city's sex education.

"The government allows schools to decide what they believe is the most appropriate teaching approach on campus, making sex education in schools ineffective," Chidgey says in an interview with a city newspaper in May last year. Reverend Po agrees. "Sex education has not been treated in a serious manner and has been excluded in the education syllabus of schools in Hong Kong because of the beliefs of certain schools." In essence, the current education system has not been conducive for understanding sex or sexuality and the consequences could be dire."

If you dig slightly deeper, it's evident that the flawed education system could actually be hindering the LGBTI community on a wider legislative scale. "If you look at the table of the highest performing schools in Hong Kong, you'll notice that most are religiously affiliated with a few exceptions," points out Dr Suen. "And who goes to these schools? Politicians and lawmakers, who have been influenced by traditional, religious-based values

knew I was gay and they were all comfortable about it," says Neil. "But here I feel hesitant, because I still feel that I'm working in an Asian context. If a student asks if I have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, my response is 'I'm your teacher, so my personal life has no interest for you'. "Even though my principle is very supportive, he did advise that my sexuality be kept on the down low because it might complicate things with parents."

There are certain social tightropes to tread for anyone who is an educator, but when you're a gay teacher, the whole situation becomes exacerbated. "Teachers are supposed to be role models for young people," says Dr Tang. "The general stigma and stereotype of LGBTI people make it difficult for teachers to come out because if they do, they are being blamed for 'corrupting' the morality of young people. The education sector can be an extremely challenging environment for LGBTI students and teachers."

We talk with teacher Tim Loo (his real name). He wishes he could come out at the Christian school that he works in, but fears that his colleagues would gossip behind his back. "One time I heard a student making fun of one of the boys by calling him gay and a sissy," Loo recalls. "At that moment, I thought, how awesome would it be if I just came out right there and then? That would blow their minds because they would understand what a gay man is like." But alas – it's not that simple and schools are indeed full of gossip.

"One time a colleague of mine broke out in a rash," says Paul (not his real name), a teacher at one

Unfortunately, kids can be cruel and in confined spaces even more so. "I made the mistake of telling a classmate I was gay," says 15-year-old student Mon Ho-lun. "Soon the whole class knew, and a group of boys after school would just follow me. I was dating someone at the time and when we were out I would get followed, watched and snickered at. It was just so psychologically draining that after a while I dropped out. It wasn't worth it." We ask Mon if he ever sought help from the school, but he said he didn't want to risk the school outing him to his parents – a classic caught-between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place situation. The same issue happened to 14-year-old Wing (not his real name). "Other students started writing profanity on my desk once they found out [I was gay]. One student was even bold enough to come up to me and says, 'you gays, why are you fighting for gay rights? You don't deserve it'. I never sought help because I didn't want my parents to know."

Education's purpose is to replace an empty mind with a full and open one, but what we are witnessing in many of Hong Kong's classrooms is a vicious cycle of discrimination against LGBTI people, without the proper and ever necessary legislation to prevent it. And in schools where there's a 'triple C' threat – Christian and Conservative imbibed with Chinese traditions – sadly, things are unlikely to change any time soon. ■

Find out more about the **It Gets Better Project** at itgetsbetter.org.

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