

Classroom Etiquette

While my message this morning is short, it concerns a topic that is very important.

You will remember that at last week's assembly I spoke about private tuition. I said that there is no need for you to look beyond our College for extra help as 'all your educational needs are catered for each and every day in the classrooms here at SPC'. I stressed that it is important that you do not get into the habit of thinking that your private tutor is more helpful in your schooling than your class teacher. I also mentioned the situation in Japan where many students see school as a place of rest, somewhere to catch up on some much needed sleep, before the real business of study starts later in the day at juku.

Over the past few months I have been paying close attention to what is happening in our classrooms. As I have been moving around the school, I have been observing and listening to classes from Form 1 through to Form 7 across all subject areas. I have also spoken to many students during the school day and also after hours. I may well have spoken to you as you have been waiting in the queue to get your recess food; or while you have been watching the football or basketball matches at lunchtime; or when you have been traveling home on the bus. I have talked to Prefects and with other student leaders in the school. I have also spoken with teachers and with members of the alumni.

From what I have seen and heard, and from what I have been told by so many people, you are not working hard enough, or smartly enough, in the classroom.

We heard a very interesting and inspiring talk at a recent assembly by Dr. Saimond Ip, and old boy of SPC. You might recall Dr. Ip telling us about the time when the boys in his year group decided that they were going to work incredibly hard and achieve results that SPC boys had not previously experienced. Dr. Ip told us that while many of his classmates were from humble families they were determined to do well in the A-Level examinations and give themselves every opportunity to gain entry to a top university. Indeed, his year group did perform exceptionally well with a number awarded scholarships to Princeton and other prestigious universities in the United States as well as to Oxford and Cambridge.

You might also recall that Dr. Ip referred to the high academic performances of some other schools in Hong Kong, particularly at (School A, School B and School C). I remember watching your reaction when Dr. Ip named these schools. Many of you smiled or chuckled when Dr. Ip mentioned SPC in the same sentence as those other schools. Maybe you were a little embarrassed that Dr. Ip could even suggest that St. Paul's College boys are as good as the boys at (School A), or the boys and girls at (School B), or the girls at (School C). You were probably thinking about the newspaper stories and league tables that year after year name these schools as the top academic schools in Hong Kong, maybe with only passing mention of St. Paul's College in certain years. Yes, Dr. Ip and his classmates did wonderfully well but what about all the other years? What happened to all those SPC students?

On the 1st of September each year, 180 fresh and enthusiastic boys commence their secondary schooling at SPC in Form 1. They come to us from our Primary School and from other excellent primary schools, many in the local area but others a long way away. Our Form 1 boys have excellent academic records from their primary schools, many with straight 'A' grades, as well as an 'A' conduct grade. Many have strong backgrounds in playing a musical instrument, singing in their primary school choir, or being in the school football team. They are true all-rounders.

Our Form 1 boys have talent and promise. In this respect, they are no different to the Form 1 boys who started two months ago at (School A, School B and School C). They have just as good a chance of performing as well, if not even better, than their counterparts in the other schools. The question we must ask ourselves is 'what is happening at SPC between Form 1 and Form 7 that might prevent our boys reaching their true potential'?

I believe that the answer lies in the classrooms, laboratories and other special teaching rooms. You see, what you boys have been telling me, what the teachers have been telling me, what the alumni have been telling me, and what I have seen and heard, is that many of you do not take study seriously enough, that you do not always listen to your teachers, and that you can treat the classroom as a place to socialise with classmates rather than a place of work. I find this very concerning.

The classroom is where the hard work starts. If this is not the case, then you have little chance of being successful. You should remember that since becoming a DSS school five years ago, our classes are smaller in size. The days of 42 boys per class, as was the case in Dr. Ip's time, are well and truly in the past. You also need to understand that the school day is short and that time is very precious. The lessons are only 35 minutes long, with only 2 or 4 lessons per week in many subjects. There is a great deal of information to absorb and skills to learn but often not enough time to get it all done. This is particularly the case in Form 5 and Form 7 where the pressures of examinations reduce further the time that is available in the classroom.

This is what I mean by being smart in each and every class. You do not have the luxury of unlimited time to take five or ten minutes at the start of every lesson getting yourself settled and organised. Similarly, you do not have the time toward the end of a lesson to wind down and relax. A 35 minute lesson must be as close as possible to 35 minutes of hard work. To lose 5, 10 or 15 minutes each lesson through inactivity is to reduce effective study time in a subject by 14%, 28% or 42%.

But it is not simply a matter of effective use of time. I am concerned to be told that some classes are noisy, with boys having conversations that have nothing to do with the lesson; with boys calling out, demanding answers to questions; with boys acting selfishly and paying little regard to the rights of others in the classroom. I have been told that in some classes this may involve three or four boys while in other lessons it is the entire class. This is not the way you should be working and certainly not the way you should be

behaving. How can teachers be expected to teach, and boys be expected to learn, if there is noise in the classroom?

You will remember the Discipline Master, Mr. Wong, speaking to you at assembly about the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. Mr. Wong told you that every teacher and every student at SPC has the right to teach and the right to learn. All of us have the responsibility to ensure that this occurs. You might well say that 'yes, it is noisy in my classes, but it is friendly behaviour, with no hurt intended'. That may be so, but any activity in the classroom that prevents others from working is a breach of the Charter of Rights and Responsibilities.

Mr. Wong and I will be paying close attention to your classroom behaviour, starting today. When cases of unacceptable classroom behaviour are brought to our attention, then firm action will be taken. This action will apply to all cases of unacceptable behaviour, regardless of whether it is by one or two boys or by an entire class.

Let's work together at creating quieter classrooms wherein teachers can teach and boys can learn. I believe that this first step is absolutely essential if we are to raise the academic standing of each boy in this Hall. I know that deep down you all want to do well at school. For this to happen, however, each of you must start by taking study more seriously and showing greater respect for your teachers and fellow classmates.

I wonder what is happening in the classrooms today at (School A, School B and School C).

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