

## What is to be done about the P word?

November 18, 2012 By Daniel J. Bauer

Last Sunday's local English press reported on still another of those upsetting surveys among our youth. The Taiwan Fund for Children and Families conducted the study in the months of September and October, asking our teens to respond to statements about pressure in their lives.

More than 15 percent of the youth surveyed had thought of committing suicide in the previous week (TT 11-11-12 p.2).

I asked myself what this could mean. Passing frustrations, hurt feelings, and the general sturm und drang of life may provoke extreme ideas for all of us, not only our teens. The question of age, however, did push a button. What is this thing about suicide being attractive to a surprisingly large group of our young friends?

An especially worrisome detail here is that high-achieving students seem to be at particular risk. The greatest percentage of students in the study who spoke of suicide had made it to the 97th percentile in their scores in the basic competency test for junior high students. The suggestion, then, is that students winding up grade-wise in the top 3 percent of the heap may be the ones who need our attention the most.

Among teenagers aged 15 to 18, the greatest cause of depression, says the foundation, is worry over academic performance. The number of respondents who felt stressed over academics is three times the number of those who felt stressed by relationship or family issues.

When I think of "pressure," I think of work pressure. The P word makes me think of my numerous former students who now have jobs that regularly demand they work till 9 o'clock at night, or 9:30, or perhaps later three, four, even five nights a week. The P word brings to mind lists of hidden duties that so many of us older in life are expected to handle for our institutions because, well, because it's just that way: everybody's got to do more nowadays simply to survive. It's not a question of becoming a work-machine to get ahead, but of knocking your brains out like a battery-operated robot simply to maintain the pace, to not fall behind, to not let others get the drop on you, and lose, if not your job, your

self-respect.

The P word hammers us all up against a collective wall partly in the form of competition. Competition: we cannot escape it.

Thoughts of suicide among our youth, prompted by anxiety to beat the competition and win the grade game, are reflections of our society at large. Our young friends are far from stupid. They open their eyes and see a culture and educational structure that largely reduce their value, their importance as persons, to the kinds of grades they receive in tests and on report cards.

Maybe it's just me, and maybe I should find a new song to sing, but I plumb don't like the obsession I find in Taiwan (and elsewhere) to measure every last ounce of every individual thing under the sun. We tell ourselves we can measure the worth of colleagues by what they publish, and by how much, and where. We say we can discern "good" students from "bad" students by measuring them. We talk of all manner of tests for proficiency ratings, for language abilities, for "outcomes" and "core skills." Are these ways of measuring all so accurate?

Perhaps it's Don Q. chasing windmills, but I just can't get fired up about grades and tests. I am skeptical of them. Grades and tests cannot give us the true measure of our youth. I am a believer in something else.

I believe a day will come when fewer of our youth will think of ending lives that have hardly begun, a day when we'll find ways more compassionate and humane to appreciate students not for their academic prowess but for their ideals, their effort, their characters and their potential.

If we want happier teenagers, we need to tell them with absolute clarity that we love and treasure them with or without high grades. No youth in Taiwan or anywhere else should have to think they must earn the tenderness or the affection of a mom or dad (or a teacher) by being an academic superstar.

Thoughts of suicide among our youngest citizens are warning signs. These thoughts are telling us that ours is a society that has a whole lot of waking up to do.

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**Talking points:**

1. This column focuses on a recent survey among high school students in Taiwan. 15% of the respondents said they had thoughts about suicide in the previous week. Does this surprise you?
2. In the survey, the students most inclined to "think about suicide" were in the 97th percentile for the "core efficiency" exam, the very top 3%. They said academic pressure, not relationship or family problems, is hard for them. Do you feel our superior students need more help than "average students" to feel happy in life?
3. The column argues that Taiwan society puts too much pressure on people by "measuring" and "rating" them for accomplishments and success. Do you feel we can measure (and grade) people to call them successful?

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