

# A lesson in laying down the Law

## Taking 1997 into the classroom proves a tough test for experts

**E** DUCATION experts sat down six years ago with a grand plan. Was there a way of teaching children all about Hongkong and 1997 — and keeping them awake in the process?

Demystifying all the clauses and sub-clauses of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law is no easy task. And, with the release of the Education Department's curriculum teaching kit last week, the question has been asked — was it worth it?

Legislators, teachers, experts and students seem united in giving the department 10 out of 10 for effort, but a dunce cap for execution. The kit has been criticised for being dull and too complicated while its drafters have been accused of self-censorship.

The teaching kit is well-presented, with board game, card game and two sets of slide show masters in English and Chinese.

The main text, titled Suggestions on Teaching Strategies, is effectively a rearguard of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and the Basic Law with suggested teaching methods and objectives. At the end of each chapter are extracts from the original text for reference.

But something seems to be missing. In its eagerness to place the sensitive topic in a neutral — some might say rosy — light, the drafters seem to have applied the same selectiveness that has sometimes distinguished our northern neighbour's coverage of history.

On the historical background of the

*Students will this term sit down for the first time to study what the Basic Law means for Hongkong. The Education Department's new curriculum teaching kit aims to interest schoolchildren in what 1997 is all about. But does it tell the whole story? And will it work? As CANDY WONG reports, the initiative is already under question.*

Sino-British negotiation over Hongkong, the text names the three treaties concluded between Britain and China but no background is given as to why they were signed and the context of those treaties.

And in chapter five, which deals with the Basic Law Drafting Committee, the text states the membership as of 1985 and November 1989 respectively. But the resignation of three local drafters — Mr Louis Cha, Mr Martin Lee Chu-ming and Mr Sze-to Wah — after the June 4 incident is not mentioned.

Similarly the arguments for and against the amendment of the Basic Law are not covered.

The 205 illustrated transparencies are meant for use in accordance with the text to explain abstract ideas. For instance, the one about Chinese resumption of sovereignty in 1997 shows a cheerful Chinese standing on the Kowloon peninsula waving goodbye to a Caucasian,

who holds the Union Jack, walking away on Lantau Island.

The board game, basically a modified version of Monopoly, features the big letters of HK divided into 97 steps, an analogy to the period between the start of Sino-British talks and the transfer of sovereignty in 1997. Players have to answer one of the 30 questions when they step on to a certain slot.

But whoever set up the questions has some legislators worried about their memory, and perhaps their intelligence as well. Legislative Councillor and political science lecturer at the Chinese University of Hongkong Mr Andrew Wong Wang-fat said the questions had hit a wrong chord by focusing on past development.

And fellow legislator Mr Steven Poon Kwok-ling found the questions too difficult and he doubted the necessity for memorising the hard historical facts. "What's the point of remembering who's the 22nd governor of Hongkong? You've got to know the content of Basic Law and its implication on the future of Hongkong," he said.

Meeting Point's Mr Fred Li Wah-ming fared well on the questions but agreed the game should assess students' knowledge of future changes instead, which he believed to be of greater importance.

"Why can't they come up with questions like 'how is the chief executive of the future SAR chosen?'" he said.

But he said watching the slide show before playing would help, as the slide show had most of the important answers.

The great care taken to sift out politically-charged materials has somehow backfired, too. Mr Cheng Kai-nam, vice-president of the pro-Beijing Federation of Education Workers Hongkong, said the teaching kit was boring and unrealistic because the department had been over-cautious in exploring materials in the two documents.

"We understand that it's an official curriculum and there must be certain limitations," he said. "[They are] too careful in avoiding those sensitive areas."

Mr Cheng said the his group would create supplementary materials for the kit to make it more lively. "The political controversy has given people the impression that the Basic Law only talks about political structure," he said. "But if you present it in a creative way it can be very interesting."

Some see a greater evil in the selection of positive materials by the Education Department. Legislator Mr Cheung Man-kwong, president of the Professional Teachers' Union, said the game was a product of prevailing political climate and the Government's wish to get on with the political negotiations smoothly and cheerfully.

"The theme of the game is on step 94, that co-operation between the two governments will lead to a smooth transition. [The department] has simply wiped out all the dangers and conflicts during the negotiation," he said.

"It's a one-sided political message. From a teacher's point of view I cannot accept this message."

Mr Tam Koon-che, senior inspector at the Education Department and a drafter of the kit, said the greatest hurdle in preparing the teaching kit was the test of accuracy and objectivity.

"We simply can't express the two important political documents in our own everyday language," he said. "We have to stick to the original text because there is always the danger of distortion."

He stressed the teaching kit was only a catalyst and it should never be used on its own right. When students asked about issues beyond the boundary set out in the curriculum, teachers should resort to their own conscience for explanation. "Teachers have to do their homework too," he said.