

Urge the Government to allow children exercise their right to participation in curriculum development

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I. Introduction

As we all know, knowledge is unlimited. It is impossible to learn everything. So, we have to choose what to learn. Hong Kong students acquire their knowledge mainly in schooling. Therefore schools have to be careful in designing the school curriculum for students. Adults have done abundant research studying children and finding out what they need at different stages in their school life. However, children have never been invited to take part in planning their own curriculum. It is not reasonable since children are the ones who are influenced directly. We strongly believe that with children's ideas, curriculum development would be done more efficiently and successfully. The curriculum would be more suitable for students.

In 2002, the Legislative Council passed the motion of "Expediently harmonize legislation and policies with the Convention on the Rights of the Child". According to Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunities to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law. It is obvious that children have the right to participate in curriculum development.

The Convention also recognizes the basic right of children as Protection, Survival, Development and Participation. In Hong Kong, the rights to Protection, Survival, Development of children are achieved comparatively to a satisfactory extent. However, it seems that the right to Participation has been overlooked. Children are seldom given chance to participate, even in matters affecting them. This results in the passive characters of children and their lack of concern about social matter. We strongly believe that children's participation should begin with the participation in curriculum development. By this, children's sense of belonging to the society would be much improved.

In order to attain children's participation in curriculum development, we propose to set up an advisory committee made up of school children, called the Curriculum Development Council for School Children. This council will act as a channel for communication between school children and the government.

It should be noted that when we talk about "participate", it does not mean that we have to be the one to make the final decisions on matters concerning the curriculum. Adults are experienced and professional. Yet, children know their own needs best and are directly influenced by the curriculum. In the development of curriculum, the opinions of both parties should be considered. Through participation, our aims are to know what is going on with our curriculum, to express our opinions and be sure that they are being seriously taken into account.

II. The Present Circumstances and Situation Facing by Students

The present education system in Hong Kong is mainly divided into 2 parts – Hong Kong-based curriculum and school-based curriculum. Hong Kong-based curriculum is the shell of education, it is the general syllabus designed by the Education and Manpower Bureau. School-based curriculum allows the schools to have the freedom on choosing their direction to suit their students' ability and interest.

However, the present education system is too examination-oriented. Examinations have dominated the idea of learning. Students have lost the motivation to learn. Instead they go to school simply for the sake of getting high grades in examinations or aiming to acquire certificates. This is also why private tutorial classes have such a popular trend among Hong Kong school children — they want to hunt for tips, so that they can do better in exams.

Hong Kong students are often criticized for being too passive in learning and having no creativity. In most situations, they only memorize all the words in the textbook and recite all the points onto the test paper. They are trained to be like a programmed computer. Some even lost the eagerness to learn. Memory-based education requires less individual thinking and analytical skills. In the end, they gained very little.

Actually, the above problems can be avoided if students are allowed to voice out their opinions on this issue. These few years, the education system has been changing dramatically. It causes a lot of confusion and misconceptions to both teachers and students. Every time the government gets a new idea, they try it for a period of time and when they find that it's not workable, they stop it abruptly and make other changes again. The main reason for causing this to happen is because the development of curriculum in the past never involves children. Subsequently, when they take it into action, many troubles occurred.

Some may say that the students nowadays are too passive and are unwilling to give opinions. However, in the results of the questionnaires that we conducted, it clearly indicated that actually lots of students are very interested in the issue. We discovered that lots of students are enthusiastic in participating if there is a chance. Nearly 92% of the student respondents agreed that students should participate in the curriculum development because it is their right to do so. They think that if student members can participate, they can reflect concrete and useful feelings and suggestions towards the education system for the reference of the Curriculum Development Council. They think that they should have the right to express their opinions.

III. Introduction of the existing Curriculum Development Council

1. Background information

The Curriculum Development Council is a free-standing advisory body appointed by the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The Council gives advice to the Government on all matters relating to curriculum development for the school system from kindergarten to the sixth form. It suggests objectives, strategies as well as projects to the Government. It was formerly known as the Curriculum Development Committee and was first established in 1972. The Curriculum Development Committee was re-organized in 1988 and renamed the Curriculum Development Council (CDC).

The purpose of re-organization was to enable the CDC to be more responsive to current and future needs of schools. It is expected to increase opportunities for practicing teachers to participate actively in all stages of the curriculum development process, and also for the development of a quality curriculum attuning to the needs of the students and the community.

Membership of the CDC and its subordinating committees includes heads of schools, practicing teachers, academics from tertiary institutions, professionals from related bodies or related fields, representatives from the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority and the Vocational Training Council, parents, employers, as well as officers from the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Social Welfare Department.

2. The role of the Curriculum Development Council

The main tasks of the Curriculum Development Council are:

- Setting general directions of curriculum policies in school education
- Formulate directions of development in the Key Learning Areas and map out plans and strategies for the development of different curriculum organizations
- Advise on matters related to the conduct of research and development of learning resources in support of all levels of schooling and children with special educational needs

3. The structure of the Curriculum Development Council

The Curriculum Development Council has 3 components:

- The Curriculum Development Council
- Coordination committees
- Subject committees

The Curriculum Development Council serves as a middle manager, and is responsible for all strategic works, drafting objectives and projects of curriculum development. Members of the CDC are appointed by the Secretary for Education and Manpower who is empowered by the Chief Executive. The coordination committees are responsible for coordination works. They self-monitor each level and category of the curriculum to ensure that the curriculum is balanced. The subject committees are responsible for the role of enforcement. They revise the outlines, the teaching and reference information of each subject according to the arrangement of the strategies and projects that are drafted by the CDC.

4. Curriculum Development

The Curriculum Development Council continually researches to reform the curriculum and it carries out “Target Oriented Curriculum” and “School-based Curriculum”. In addition, it develops curriculum strategies, e.g. “Mastery Learning”. Moreover, it enhances Chinese history and culture and information technology. It also carries out curriculum researches. In the new arrangement of curriculum, the curriculum possesses the following four characteristics:

- Broad and balanced
- Keeping abreast with the development of a knowledge-based society
- Learning at different stages of schooling
- Continuous and coherent

5. Weaknesses of the present structure of the Curriculum Development Council

5.1 Lack of publicity

The result of the survey shows that 74% of the students do not know which government institution is responsible for curriculum development. Some even do not know that there is a Curriculum Development Council. It is mainly because the Curriculum Development Council has insufficient publicity.

It has some information about itself in its website. It also uploads the results of the general meetings on the Internet. But only a few people access to it and read those long essays. In addition, the printed documents published by the Curriculum Development Council have few pictures but are full of text. Children are not interested in them very much. As a result, students will not read the leaflets seriously. To make the printed documents more attractive, the Curriculum Development Council should publish them in suitable versions cater for children. It may use cartoon and colourful format to replace the boring text for presenting information. For example, “An article ABC for Basic Law” is the children version of Basic Law. And the “United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child” also has a children version.

5.2 No student participation

Members of the Curriculum Development Council and its committees include principals, teachers, professors, representatives of the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority and the Vocational Training Council, parents, employees, and officers from the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Social Welfare Department.

Before the Curriculum Development Council gives advice to the government or makes any improvement in the curriculum, it carries out researches and uses different ways to collect opinions from the society. It consults professors for their opinions. Surveys are conducted among different classes in the society. They are mainly teachers and parents, but not students.

When we interviewed Professor Wong Yuk-shan, Chairman of the Curriculum Development Council, he told us that students are very welcome to give their opinions to the CDC. He said that we can express our opinions in written form and send it to the CDC. However, students in Hong Kong seldom voice their views to it. It is because of the lack of publicity of the CDC as mentioned above. They may also be afraid that their opinions will not be accepted.

The purpose of improving the curriculum is to ensure that better education can be provided to students. It is a pity that what students, the recipient of education, really need is usually not being understood, without their participation in designing the curriculum.

IV. Proposed structure of the Curriculum Development Council for School Children

Student participation is essential in curriculum development because we are the users of the curriculum. We should help to think of enhanced and workable ways in developing the curriculum. In particular, local education is undergoing a major reform nowadays. However, the current situation is that students are usually just informed when the curriculum has already been changed, and we find that we were often not being informed.

In an interview conducted with Professor Wong Yuk-shan, Chairman of the Curriculum Development, Professor Wong agreed that student participation is vital. He stated that the CDC could involve students in the brainstorming process. While we agreed to the suggestion, we think that this is *not enough*. In order to allow children to participate genuinely in school curriculum development, we propose to establish The Curriculum Development Council for School Children (CDCSC).

1. The Nature

The Curriculum Development Council for School Children will be an independent advisory agent subsidized by the SAR Government. It aimed to reflect opinions of school children on curriculum development.

2. The Committee

The Curriculum Development Council for School Children will be divided into two departments, The Secondary One to Three Department, The Secondary Four to Six Department, each consisting of 20 members, making up 40 in total. Each department will have a committee consisting of one president, one vice-president, one secretary, one treasurer and one public relations officer. Members are eligible in The Curriculum Development Council for School Children for a maximum period of 2 years.

3. The Role of the CDCSC in Curriculum Development

One General Assembly will be held once a month. Basically, only children can attend the General Assembly, but representatives of the Curriculum Development Council will be invited to attend the meetings on relevant issues occasionally.

Members are to collect opinions from students of diversified backgrounds. Opinions could be collected through letters, emails, faxes, and message boards and discussion forums on the Internet. One Opinion Box will be put in every school. Committee Members will go through the opinions collected in the box once a month. They should also conduct large-scale surveys and hold public student forums whenever necessary. Students will definitely find it easier to express their opinions, without constraints, to students of their similar age.

Data and opinions collected will be seriously discussed in the General Assembly. Approved proposals will be sent to the CDC. Any topics raised in The Curriculum Development Council for School Children should be discussed thoroughly until a consensus is made.

Furthermore, members should have the right to sit in meetings of the Curriculum Development Council on relevant issues. The Curriculum Development Council should involve students in the brainstorming process whenever they wish to introduce drastic reforms. They shall also send their proposals (i.e. those closely related to school children) to the CDCSC for consultation before sending it to the SAR Government to ensure students are fully informed of the possible changes. Members reserve the right to hold debates over the proposals. They will then send their suggestions and comments of these proposals to the CDC. The CDC should seriously consider their opinions, but the CDC holds the right to make final decisions.

V. Results of the Survey

When the idea of allowing children to participate in the development of school curriculum first came into our minds, we began to collect information and obtain opinions from students, teachers and principals of schools in Hong Kong. Our group members started to prepare three different sets of questionnaires, each aiming at a target group: the students, teachers and the principals. We decided that the questionnaires for teachers and principals would consist of two parts. In the questionnaires, we try to obtain the opinions on whether students should participate in school curriculum. We also ask about students' opinions on the present curriculum.

We successfully carried out the survey in 15 schools randomly ranging from Band I to III. In each school, one class of students from each form (from F.1 to F.6), was required to fill in the questionnaires. Each class has an average of 42 students. We also sought the co-operation of 12 teachers as well as 1 school principal from each school to take part in the survey. After a few weeks' preparations, we began this large-scale survey. In the following days, we made a lot of telephone calls and contacted principals and teachers in charge. Finally, all the questionnaires were collected, analyzed and the results were worked out.

A total of 15 schools were surveyed. More than 3,000 students, 140 teachers and principals completed and returned the questionnaires. The results were encouraging.

Part A: Students

Over 92% of students agreed that children should have the right to participate in the development of school curriculum. It was an impressive result, and so our motion is generally supported by most students. Hong Kong students do not only have their own opinions but also have a good understanding of their right to participate in developing curriculum for themselves. As for the question on which government department or bureau is responsible for curriculum development, nearly 40% of students surveyed were not quite sure about the answer. Many of them did not even know that Education Department had already merged into the Education and Manpower Bureau. It implied that the Government did not have enough publicity in this regard.

Many secondary school students completing the questionnaires held neutral stance towards the present

curriculum. According to the respondents, most aspects of the curriculum were acceptable, including the number of subjects taught as well as the contents and levels of major subjects such as English and Mathematics.

However, it is worthy to note that there is a growing trend of dissatisfaction with the present curriculum, as the students become older (Form 4 to Form 6). This is easy to explain. Older students have a lot of pressure from examinations. Although most surveyed students were satisfied with the number of minor subjects like music and art in their schools, they agreed that minor subjects should be made compulsory in the secondary school curriculum.

Some students suggested making moral and civic education a compulsory subject in secondary schools. Others suggested abolishing the present examination system in which there was a direct relationship with study pressure and examinations.

Most senior secondary school students claimed that the education they had received from secondary 1 to 3 could not give them a clear direction of choosing their subject streams when they reach Form 4. Will this situation be improved if students can be involved in curriculum development? All of us should consider this question seriously.

The respondents were also asked about their opinions on the level of participation of children in curriculum development. The results obtained were encouraging. 84% of these students endorse the idea of students' participation in curriculum development. 65% of students were willing to be involved in curriculum development because of several reasons. Some thought that when the opinions of students could be voiced out, the curriculum could be more diversified. They expected the syllabuses designed would be able to cater for students' needs, so students would be more interested and motivated in learning. Others agreed to take part in curriculum development simply because education is a matter closely related to them. As a direct recipient of education, their right to involve in curriculum development should be exercised. Another reason was that some students wish to gain experiences, enhance their organization skills, develop their critical thinking and broaden their horizons through taking part in this activity.

There were also students who would not like to participate in curriculum development. They had their own reasons behind, too. Some foresaw the time-consuming nature of this activity and did not want to spare time from their studies. Others were afraid that curriculum development would be a complex and boring activity. Some worried their opinions would never be adopted by members of the Curriculum Development Council since they were less educated and experienced. Also, a number of students doubted their ability in curriculum planning.

Concerning the possibility of children playing a role in designing curriculums, the opinions given by the students were equally positive. 70% of them thought that children participation in curriculum development was possible. When we asked them for the possible ways to do so, more than half of them agreed with our proposal of establishing a committee with student representatives to voice out opinions on curriculum development. Other think that sending letters of suggestions to the Curriculum Development Council individually and seeking help from the mass media can also do.

To conclude, the results of the survey reflected the eagerness of secondary school students in Hong Kong to voice out their opinion on the existing syllabus and curriculum that they are studying. Some of them even wanted to participate in curriculum development. Most of them, however, were not confident of themselves and were worried that adults would not listen to them. This is owing to the fact that children's right to participation in curriculum development has never been recognized in Hong Kong. With the establishment of the Curriculum Development Council for School Children, we expect to see the following changes in education:

- Students voice out actively their opinions in matters concerning curriculum development
- Students have interest and motivation in learning
- Teaching and learning become more interactive and effective

Part B: teachers & principals

A total of about 140 teachers took part in our survey. From the data, we can see that more than half of the teachers had heard of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its work. It meant that teachers in Hong Kong are quite aware of the rights of the children. I am glad to report that over 70% of teachers agreed that children should have the right to participate in curriculum development. As mentioned by one of our speakers, the publicity strategy of the Government was poor. It was ironical to discover that even teachers do not know which government department or bureau is responsible for curriculum development.

The data also showed that 74% of the teachers are not satisfied with the present syllabus. They wanted to have it regulated. Most teachers also wanted to reduce the number of subjects taught in school. There were also many teachers who think that the idea of allowing students to take part in planning the school curriculum is feasible. A large percentage of teachers agreed to the idea of setting up a student committee as a proper channel to communicate with the Curriculum Development Council. They also saw the advantages of students getting themselves involved in the curriculum. They believed that students might have stronger motivation to learn and facilitate their learning if they are given the autonomy to plan and design the curriculum. It also encouraged students to participate in social affairs.

However, teachers do have some worries when students participate in the development of the curriculum. The first reason is that students may not understand the needs of the society, especially the global development, and some of their ideas may be naïve and infeasible. Moreover, students are not professionals and when their proposals are not practicable, they may be turned down and discourage their initiative in return. From the survey, teachers generally worry that students may not be mature enough in such important education matters.

Principals also showed concern about the students' participation in curriculum planning. Their comments were as follows:

- Too diversified a curriculum to cater for the wishes of the student committee
- Dissatisfaction among those whose wishes are not being entertained
- Cannot satisfy the individual need of the children
- Children may choose topics that are far beyond their level of understanding
- Children who participate may not have sufficient representation

It may not be possible to cover and satisfy all the suggestions given by the children, but we will try our best to follow the major ideas proposed by most of the children participated in the committee. Some students may not have perspective on global trend, but through the CDCSC, they could co-operate with the professionals. Furthermore, when they are involved in the curriculum development, they will have more attention on the issue. On choosing representatives, we should choose the ones who have eagerness and ability, and who can integrate different opinions of students.

Despite the fact that there are hesitations from teachers and principals, we look forward to seeing an independent student council (Curriculum Development Council for School Children) established. Any constructive suggestions must be passed from this council to the Curriculum Development Council for further discussion and consideration.

VI. Foreign reference from Australia

Although the participation of children in curriculum development is still quite a new concept in many

countries, and not many foreign references can be found. There are still some schools that make an effort to offer opportunities for children to express their opinions on the curriculum.

In Australia, there are a few very encouraging examples. In South Australia, a school named Ascot Park Primary School had a student representative council that allowed students to have a say in decisions that were of interest or importance for them including topics like the school curriculum. 2-4 students per class were selected as representatives. They meet fortnightly to deal with the school issues. This student representative council enabled students to be more turned on learning as they felt that they were involved in making the decisions. From this example, we can see that even a primary school could afford to set up a student council with much success, why can't we as secondary school students give it a try?

Another school in Adelaide called Riverdale R-7 – a growing state school with approximately 350 students. It too had a student committee which had 28 student representatives as members. The participation of children was then encouraged through regular, formal class meetings and representation on student committees. They have dealt with curriculum issues such as content and timetabling. The major success of this committee was that with the suggestions of the students on the curriculum, the children did learn more effectively and as the children also saw the results of their participation, it motivated them to go further. In the article, the teacher also said that children's opinions actually "opened their minds and eyes to a range of possibilities not previously considered." Another success of this committee was that it helped to clarify the issue of personal rights and responsibilities as well as developing strategies to overcome barriers.

The committee was not an easy success. They faced problems and barriers too. Some teachers and grown-ups were worried the fact that the materials concerning school matters such as the curriculum content were too difficult and professional for students in the lower grade to understand because most of the material were written for year 4 and beyond. However, things turned out to be fine. Children accepted the challenge and worked tirelessly to complete the tasks. In fact, with materials slightly modified the children had little problem with understanding the concepts and managed to throw a wealth of ideas as well as sensible discussion points.

Although these two examples happen to be from a country which is of a different education system from Hong Kong, they support the idea that having children participation in designing the curriculum can be possible. To end this section, please allow me to quote from a teacher working in Riverdale R-7 school – "Children should be partners in planning and implementation..." Let us take a positive approach to affirming and supporting the realization of the potential of children in Hong Kong.

VII. Conclusion

To conclude, our team is dissatisfied with the fact that school children are not given an opportunity to play an active role in the development of curriculum, which is something that directly affects the quality and quantity of education they receive in school. School children, being the target of the whole education system should have the right to voice out their opinion on matter of all aspects of it, such as the development of curriculum.

Therefore, we would like to urge the Government to allow children to exercise their right to participation in curriculum development. This motion adheres to the principle stated in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,

"States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

We believe secondary school children are competent of giving sound suggestions on this matter. It is reasonable to carry out measures to ensure that such right of theirs is respected. The relevant actions taken will not simply serve as a protection and recognition of the children's right to participation in educational matter but also bring about advancement in the structure of curriculum development. With the participation of children, professional planners would get a fuller picture of the real need and interest of school children directly. Better curriculum will thus be able to be set.

Our idea of children participating in the development of curriculum is supported by Professor Wong Yuk-shan, Chairman of Curriculum Development Council. In our interview conducted with him earlier, he not more than once stated the importance of children's participation in order to better improve our present curriculum. At present, children's participation is rigid and passive, mainly in the form of their response in class, to show the teachers of their interest on the topic taught and the suitability of the teaching method. In some more encouraging cases, schools may invite children to participate in their developmental stage of their own school-based curriculum.

In principle, proposals from children are most welcomed by the CDC. However, the sad fact is that most of the children are not informed of such channel to express their ideas. In order to rectify the present situation, we sincerely hope that the Government would actively invite children to get involved. Our team proposed to establish The Curriculum Development Council for School Children, an independent advisory agent of the Curriculum Development Council with children as its members.

Another support we have got is from the result of the survey we conducted. Students, teachers and head of schools agreed with us that children should possess the right to participate in the development of curriculum. We saw that nearly all students have their own views and suggestions for improvement on the present curriculum, eagerly wanting to get a chance to voice them out. The majority of the respondents agreed with us that establishment of a student committee would be one of the most effective means for children to participate in this matter. The most encouraging fact is that we saw more than half of the student respondents are interested in and would like to devote themselves in related activities. They commented that it would be their pleasure to fully utilize this precious opportunity to contribute their ideas should such chance is given. Some see this as an invaluable learning experience outside the classroom. They believe that they are capable of being a source of suggestions and ideas as they are the one receiving the education now, the one being the most clear about the strength and drawback of the curriculum.

The setting up of an independent advisory children agent is significant in meaning. Look at the Children's Council that we are sitting in now. Its establishment called together 60 active and responsible young citizens of the community to come together to express their concern to our community. The joined forces successfully draw attentions of the Government and the media. Our effort and enthusiasm to play a more active role in the advancement of the city are clearly reflected. We, children, are capable and should be given the right to speak up! Just like our Children's Council, the Curriculum Development Council for School Children we proposed will call together capable children, dedicated to devote themselves in the advancement of the curriculum for the well-being of all school children in Hong Kong. With this joint effort, their concern and innovative ideas could reach the Government more effectively.

We, students from Diocesan Girls' School, Sha Tin Government Secondary School and two Child Ambassadors, move the motion **"Urge the Government to Allow Children Exercise their Right to Participation in Curriculum Development"** be passed.

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The website of Curriculum Development Council:

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Acknowledgements:

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Sha Tin Government Secondary School

CCC Kei Yuen College

SKH Bishop Baker Secondary School

Helen Liang Memorial Secondary School (Shatin)

Toi Shan Association College

Ju Ching Chu Secondary School (Kwai Chung)

Queen's College

La Salle College

Hong Kong Taoist Association The Yuen Yuen Institute No.1 Secondary School

Tsuen Wan Government Secondary school

Wong Shiu Chi Secondary School

Fung Kai Liu Man Shek Tong Secondary School

Choi Hung Estate Catholic Secondary School

Kau Yan College