

Motion 1

The government should allow children to participate in education reform to improve the mode of teaching and learning

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I. Preamble

Education is the most important commitment and investment of every society. Education not only has a direct bearing on the psychological and physical development of children, it is also the key to a bright future of society. Every child desires to receive quality education and learn in a good atmosphere.

Unfortunately, the education system in Hong Kong is often criticized as “spoon-feeding” and “training-oriented”, and students lack initiative and creativity. All these lead to a teaching standard that is below expectation. In view of this, the government has launched a series of education reform measures aimed at establishing an education system with “whole person development” and “life-long learning” as the core values. Although the measures have been implemented for over 3 years, the public and the educational professionals generally believe that they have not seriously taken into consideration nor do they suit the needs of the children. The sad mentality that “the main aim of education is high scores” still exists. The reasons why the reform fails to improve the mode of teaching and learning are that children are not given proper channels to express their views and that their opinions are neglected.

According to article 12 of the UN’s “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”. Although children do not have as much professional knowledge as adults do, being at the receiving end of education, they are the ones who know what they need. Hence, their participation in education reform is not only one of their inherent rights, but it can also help improve the mode of teaching and learning, resulting in a better outcome of the reform.

In order to allow children to participate in education reform, we suggest establishing a “Children’s Advisory Committee for Education Reform” that acts as a platform for children to express their opinions and liaise closely with the government.

For the above reasons, we hope to draw the attention of the government and the public to this issue with the following motion.

II. Present situation and problems of the educational reform

The responsibility for mapping out education reform lies with the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) and Education Commission (EC). EC, which consists of a group of educational professionals, reviews the education system in Hong Kong and makes suggestions for reform.

Education in Hong Kong has long been focusing on scores and examination results, neglecting training in other aspects. EC therefore suggested a series of reform measures, such as “mother tongue education”, “life-wide learning” and “through-road”. The aim of these measures is to help students “enjoy learning, communicate effectively, and develop their creativity and sense of commitment”. Unfortunately, these measures are not tailor-made to children’s needs and are changing frequently, leading to the present confusion.

For example, the government has been implementing mother tongue education since 1998. Except for 112 secondary schools, all secondary schools were required to use mother tongue as the medium of instruction. This policy was originally aimed at improving the efficiency of learning, but in less than three years, the government reversed the policy and thus brought chaos to the overall language policy. Teachers and students had to adjust to the frequent changes, leading to a mismatch in resources. As a result, the outcome of this reform was well below expectation.

According to a survey conducted by EC from September 2003 to April 2004, students still had a relatively low self-esteem. Among the interviewees, 42% of the primary students and 58% of the secondary students reported a lack of self-confidence while 47% of the primary students and 62% of the secondary students admitted a lack of passion for learning. Dr Rosanna Wong, Chairman of EC, also agreed that the pace of the reform was too fast and was difficult for schools and parents to follow.

EC proposed “student-focused” as the principle of the reform and hoped that the reform could suit the needs of students. To attain this goal, the most fundamental and direct way is to let children express their views. The present mechanism, however, does not allow children to participate in the reform. How then can the education reform be tailor-made to the needs of the children in the absence of their opinions?

III. Involving children in education reform helps improve the mode of teaching and learning

1. The importance of the modes of teaching and learning to education

The mode of teaching and learning has a direct bearing on students’ learning attitude and efficiency. A comprehensive mode of teaching and learning can motivate students in their learning process, thereby greatly enhancing the quality and efficiency of teaching while assisting students to attain an all-round development at the same time.

2. The importance of children’s views on the modes of teaching and learning

The difference of perspective between children and adults creates a discrepancy in views and opinions on education reform. The involvement of children in education reform will not only broaden the scope of consultation but will also address the needs of the children, all in all contributing to a better and more comprehensive reform. On the basis of their opinions, teaching and learning modes can be better formed towards their needs. Their voice, therefore, should not be neglected.

We hope that the government will provide channels through which children can participate in education reform to improve education practices so as to raise the efficacy of education. The voice of the children is the key to a successful reform. The following two examples are good illustrations as to how important children’s opinions are:

All-round Education

The education system in Hong Kong has been placing too much emphasis on scoring in examinations, and this has inadvertently fostered among the students a utilitarian “score-oriented” mentality, overshadowing all other aspects of development in

a student. This is why the government proposed the development of all-round education, the objective of which is to help students actualize and further their potentialities through a balanced development in five major domains: moral education, subject-based studies, physical education, interpersonal skills, and art.

EC put forth the policy of all-round education in the year 2000, but to date the government is still promoting to the public the prerogative that “the aim of education is not scores”. In the questionnaire survey we conducted, over 40% of the students considered current efforts of schools in cultivating the “moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic aspects” of a student inadequate. Moreover, the above mentioned survey conducted by EC earlier this year showed that even students themselves have a low self-esteem. Put together, these factual data prove that right now the education system is still very much “utilitarian”, and students still lack an opportunity for balanced development. All-round education is obviously not living up to its promises. In our interview, Legislator Cheung Man-Kwong commented that schools are still placing too much emphasis on developing the “intellectual” aspects of a student. While children’s participation is crucial to the successful implementation of all-round education, the government has not paid any heed to the children’s opinions, leaving the problems unsolved. Had the government involved children in education reform, they would have identified the problems at an earlier stage and made necessary amendments. This would have helped improve the effectiveness of the reform policies and in turn promoted the quality of education.

Small class education

In Hong Kong, conventional classes have a teacher-student ratio of 1:37, which is too high for teachers to attend to the needs of every student. This poses a serious hindrance to quality teaching and learning. By reducing the number of students in a class, small class education provides more interaction opportunities between teachers and students and encourages children to take the initiative to raise questions and participate in the lessons. Teachers can also provide assistance based on the individual needs of the students, helping them to develop their potential and increase the overall quality of teaching.

The government had all along failed to seriously take small class education into consideration, and it wasn’t until recent years that they started conducting research in this aspect. From the results of a questionnaire survey that included 1,544 primary and secondary school students, we find out that nearly 80% of the children think that small class education will help improve the quality of teaching. Should the government give prompt attention to the opinions of children, they would have been able to consider the feasibility of implementing small-class teaching at an earlier date, which in turn will improve the modes of teaching and learning.

3. How children’s participation can contribute to education reform and to society as a whole

Involving children in education reform will allow policy-makers to truly understand children’s needs and hence devise modes of teaching and learning that better suit their growth and development. Also, allowing children to voice their opinions is a way of motivating children to actively participate in learning. It can also build up in the children the courage to

be more vocal about their views and opinions, helping to boost their confidence. It is therefore beneficial to the growth of children. At the same time, the participation of children can also inculcate in them a sense of responsibility and belonging to both the school and society, enforcing their civic awareness, assuring them that they are indeed part of society and have a right to participate in social affairs. It is thus obvious that involving children in education reform has a positive overall effect on the education system and even the whole society.

However, the questionnaire survey we conducted in April this year showed that while over 80% of the children hope that they can participate in education reform to improve the mode of teaching and learning, a nearly equal 80% believe that right now there are not enough channels in society through which they can voice their opinions. Now that even the children themselves are eager to participate in the reform, why has the government not taken any action at this late stage to allow children to exercise the inherent rights they are born with?

IV. Establishing a Children’s Advisory Committee for Education Reform

1. Introduction

As the receivers of education, children have the clearest idea of their own needs. To enable the government to better understand the unique views of children, we propose to establish a “Children’s Advisory Committee for Education Reform”. This committee will serve as a channel through which children’s opinions can be conveyed. It will help raise the effectiveness of education reform and is a crucial step towards a comprehensive education system.

2. Functions

The committee will serve as a channel contributing to effective and continuous communication between the children and the government. Its primary functions include:

- Listening to and collecting the views and needs of children, and reflecting them to EMB to broaden the scope of its consultation;
- Assisting EMB in reviewing the performances of children in the learning process and the problems they encounter. This is to ensure a smooth implementation of the reform policies;
- Helping the government assess whether the schools are carrying out efficiently the policies adopted by EMB;
- Promoting to children the education policies that the government has adopted so that they would be informed of the current situation in the education sector. This would give the opinions of the children greater significance and more substance;
- Monitoring the work progress of EMB to ensure that they conform to the needs of children; and

- Ensuring that children can voice their opinions at different stages of the education reform process, and also involving them in formulating a broad and flexible review mechanism, so as to achieve the true “student-focused” principle of education reform.

3. Structure

Election mechanism – Each secondary school will elect two promotion ambassadors, one from junior years (form one to three) and one from senior years (form four to six). They will be responsible for promoting among their schoolmates matters related to education reform. Modelling on the election mechanism of the Legislative Council, Hong Kong as a whole will be divided into five geographical constituencies. Dividing themselves into junior and senior groups, the promotion ambassadors within each constituency shall elect members of the committee from among their fellow ambassadors in the same group. The committee members will number 60 in total. Depending on population distribution, these 60 members will be distributed among the five constituencies.

Primary schools – the target of consultation will be the children of the whole of Hong Kong. To ensure that opinions from primary school students are taken into account, the committee will establish a concern group for primary school education policies. The concern group will be formed by members from the junior years. Primary school students will be invited to attend the concern group meetings.

4. Viability

The results of the questionnaire survey we conducted show that over three-quarter of students support the idea that children should form an advisory committee to participate in education reform. And two veteran members of the education sector – Legislator Cheung Man-kwong and Dr Pang King-chee – have also given their support for our suggestions.

V. Conclusion

Three years into this laborious undertaking of reforming our education system, we have yet to see an improvement in the quality of education. The situation is worrying indeed. For all its visions of grandeur, without really having children participating in it, education reform cannot conform to the needs and the expectations of children – not to mention devising an education reform policy that can effectively enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

It is the wish of every child to receive quality education. Children’s participation in education reform can allow the government to truly understand their needs, and this is the key to a successful education reform. Involving children in education reform can foster in them a sense of responsibility and belonging towards society, allowing them to understand their inherent rights. The establishing of a “Children’s Advisory Committee for Education Reform” will provide exactly the kind of channel the children needs for effective communication with the government and conveyance of opinions to it.

The participation of children is undoubtedly indispensable to the success of education reform. Therefore I, on behalf of the 20 Child Councilors, move the motion “The government should allow children to participate in education reform to improve the mode of teaching and

learning” be passed.

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The homepage of the Hon Cheung Man-kwong: <http://www.cheungmankwong.org.hk>

The website of Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union: <http://www.hkptu.org/>

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The Hon Cheung Man-kwong

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All children who filled in the questionnaires