

The government should allow greater child participation in the formulation of education policies

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22-11-2014

*(English translation provided by the Centre for Translation
in association with the Translation Programme, Hong Kong Baptist University)*

Motion 1

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Preamble

The cultivation of talents is highly valued in Hong Kong. Children enjoy the right to education. With the passage of time and the development of the society, the government has advanced its education policies to further guarantee children's rights, including the implementation of the 12-year free primary and secondary education. However, in preparation for this motion, we found that the government rarely considered children's opinions in formulating education policies including the "334" New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum, the Moral and National Education (MNE) subject and the use of Putonghua as the medium of instruction in teaching Chinese language. In particular, there seems to be a lack of channels for the government to obtain children's opinions.

Our group holds that children, as recipients of education, are the key stakeholders in education policies. Children's opinions should thus receive due respect and protection. Our government, as the policymaker, should take into account the feelings and opinions of children so as to formulate the most appropriate policies and curricula. This motion is therefore put forward with an aim to ensure due respect and attention to children's opinions.

Current Situation

A. Children's dissatisfaction with existing education policies

We have conducted a questionnaire survey for 181 children under the age of 18. The findings show that none of the respondents give a rating of five (on a five-point scale) to current education policies, indicating that none were fully satisfied with these policies. 83% of the respondents rated their satisfaction with education policies at three or below, indicating widespread dissatisfaction regarding current education policies. More than 80% of respondents believed that education policies needed refinement. Meanwhile, up to 66% of the respondents said they had never expressed their opinions on education policies in schools, though over 60% indicated a willingness to express their views by actively participating in school events. In addition, over 70% of the respondents hoped to play a part in formulating education policies, which they believed would contribute to the optimisation of education policies and systems.

The results above show that current education policies have failed to provide platforms where children may voice their views and that children are not given enough opportunities to express their opinions.

B. Children's strong desires to participate in social affairs

In October this year we conducted an interview with Ms Lee Suet Ying, principal of a secondary school. She believed that the society is now more liberal than in the past. Students would come forward in many occasions and voice their opinions. From the MNE controversy two years ago to the recent Occupy Central movement, children have shown greater desire to participate in social affairs and policies.

We have also conducted a questionnaire survey with 50 parents. The results show that over half of the parents reported that children were only allowed minimal involvement in the formulation of major education policies. They pointed out their children were denied the opportunity to express their views under the current policy despite their desire to do so. Most of the parents admitted that the only channels for children to express their opinions on education policies were through participating in demonstrations, forums and other activities organised by non-governmental organisations at this moment.

C. Favourable opinions from parents regarding children's participation in formulating education policies

According to the above survey, 70% of the parents agreed that children should be allowed more opportunities to participate in formulating education policies and to express their opinions. They believed that children are capable of forming their opinions on education policies, and the government should take these opinions into account in policy formulation as children and youths are the end beneficiaries of the policies.

Most parents believed that children should express their opinions on government organised forums and that the government should respond to these opinions. Quite a number of respondents considered writing letters to the Education Bureau a feasible option. Parents understood that their children, as key stakeholders, were concerned about the education policies because the policies directly impact their future development, and having personal views and feelings are certainly understandable. Accordingly, parents agreed that the government should involve children in policies formulation so that the resulting policies could serve their needs.

Over half of the parents agreed with our proposal. They held that education should be student-oriented, and that by realizing our proposal children's views can be better heard by the officials. Some parents criticized the current curriculum in Hong Kong for failing to encourage children to express themselves. They supported the government's idea of providing bridging courses for senior primary school students to develop their critical faculty and to help them better understand the intricate processes of education reform.

D. The importance of children's participation in the formulation of education policies

Many believe children are too young and lack the competence to participate in formulating education policies or to express their own opinions. They believe that children's views are unrealistic, fantastical and subjective, that they need to learn more about the education system and structure before forming opinions. Children's opinions are usually regarded as overly vague, lacking in specifics and thus rarely accepted or valued. The society thus holds that children do not need to participate in the formulation of education policies. Currently, the Hong Kong government fails to regularly involve children on a broad basis in formulating education policies, resulting in insufficient child participation. Children must take the initiative to voice their views, and this indirectly discourages them from participating. Although in recent years children are increasingly involved in social affairs, they still find policy formulation incomprehensible and inaccessible because of the complexities of the education policies and the education system.

Children are capable of independent thought, and are also the biggest beneficiaries of education. The government is thus obligated to involve children in education reforms so as to formulate education policies that serve their needs. The Honorable Ip Kin Yuen, Legislative Council member of the education functional constituency, said that children's ability and maturity vary in different stages of development. By his definition, children are individuals under the age of 18, including young children and primary school students. The government should optimize the involvement of these young individuals in education reforms considering their limited capabilities at certain stages of development.

Recommendations

A. Holding an annual "Secondary School Student Conference on Education Policies"

We suggest that secondary school students set up concern groups to collect students' opinions on education policies every three months. Each secondary school will thereafter send a representative to attend the "District Secondary School Student Conference on Education Policies" (District Conference) to collect and report on the views of students in each of the 18 districts. After the District Conference, each district will send several representatives to attend the "Hong Kong Secondary School Student Conference on Education Policies" (Hong Kong Conference) to convey the demands of children. Members of the Hong Kong Conference will vote and choose several general demands from secondary school students. More opinions will be collected and interviews with relevant educators will be conducted within six months after the first conference. The collected information will then be compiled into a proposal to be submitted to the Education Bureau. The Bureau should respond to the issues raised in the proposal during the council session of the Panel on Education of the Legislative Council.

The “Secondary School Student Conference on Education Policies” is a self-initiated conference held by secondary school students. The conference aims to take a bottom-up approach in communicating views to the government, which differentiates it from the existing Youth Council. To ensure continuity of the conference, each session lasts a year. We also suggest that members of Kids’ Dream should act as the moderator of the conference. Hopefully the conference will be a channel through which secondary school students may express their views to the government.

B. Setting up “We the Children” website

Children are capable of participating in the formulation of education policies. They are expected to reach a level where there are “adult-initiated, shared decisions with children” (Rung Six of the Ladder of Children’s Participation). The most appropriate time for children to participate in the formulation is undoubtedly before the implementation of policies. Existing policies should be revised and fine-tuned regularly. For instance, the consultation for the review of the NSS curriculum should make provisions for child participation.

In view of the above, we recommend establishing a website named “We the Children”, the operation of which will be similar to that of “We the People” run by the White House. Children can freely express their opinions about different education policies and “sign” to express their support for comments that they identify with. When the signatories exceed a certain number, officials from the Education Bureau are called upon to respond to those views and relevant issues. Children’s opinions can then be widely collected, making the website an effective channel for child participation in education policies.

C. Education experts appointed by the government to collect opinions from children regularly

We understand the importance of collecting information from all sides. We believe that the government should lend an ear to children’s opinions through various avenues so that they might address the needs of different child groups. For instance, the government should take into consideration the opinions of children of a younger age or those who are weak in expressing either through speech or writing.

Hence, in line with the principle that “all children’s opinions are to be respected”, we suggest that the government should appoint education experts to collect children’s opinions at schools on an annual basis. This suggestion targets at primary school students and children with special education needs. Education experts can collect children’s views on education policies by such means as interactive games or workshops on drawing, and deliver this information to the government. We hope that children’s voices, in all their diversity, can reach the government.

D. Encouraging children’s participation in education affairs through publicity

Child participation in the formulation of education policies can help develop an initiative in children to voice out. This paves the way for active social engagement in the future. The practice of expressing opinions should be encouraged at a young age. Formulation of education policies involves not only the government, but parents, teachers and children should all take a part so that the appropriate policies get implemented.

Therefore, we propose that the government should dedicate greater publicity efforts to encourage child participation in education affairs. The government can hold free talks and organise community carnivals at community centres or community halls to promote children's rights. In this way, children will receive greater attention and their views will be given due value. This helps not only to promote our motion but also paves the way for broader expression of opinions by children in the future.

Conclusion

Education affords us an awareness of the rights to expression. However, as crucial stakeholders in education policies, children do not have the necessary channels to voice their opinions. Article 12 from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) stipulates that "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". As Hong Kong is one of the parties to the CRC, the government is obligated to consider children's opinions in formulating education policies.

We move the motion to the government, hoping that the government can allow greater child participation in the formulation of education policies. The motion aims to help refine current policy formation procedures to formulate education policies that serve children's needs. Likewise, children can learn to participate in social affairs, express their opinions, and grow up to become socially aware individuals with a sense of civic duty.

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Acknowledgements

Mr Ip Kin Yuen, Legislative Councilor and Vice-President of Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union

Mr Hui Wai Tin, Principal Lecturer, Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University

Ms Lee Suet Ying, Chairwoman, Hong Kong Association of the Heads of Secondary Schools
The parents and children who helped to complete the survey