

NGOs in Schools: Hong Kong Experience

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Hong Kong is signatory to fourteen international human rights treaties and therefore obligated “to promote universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and freedoms.” However, human rights education, be it formal or informal, has never existed in Hong Kong’s official education policy on its own right. At best, human rights education could only be sketchily found as part of the civic education for secondary schools, which has no formal curriculum and has remained an optional course.¹

NGO efforts

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hong Kong started to get involved in human rights education in early 1980s when a resource center to provide the public with human rights-related information and legal advice was set up by the Society for Community Organization, an organization with a track record in defending citizens’ rights in Hong Kong. Apart from launching campaigns on various issues of concern, the resource center also published flyers, booklets and organized exhibitions as well as training classes.

There were other efforts during the same period though in different forms. The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong and Amnesty International, for instance, produced teaching resources on various social issues with occasional discussion on the human rights implications of the issues. These materials were distributed to schools.

However, with the lack of official policy support, systematic school-based human rights education was scarce and the numerous endeavors of the financially-constrained NGOs have been rendered sporadic and piece-meal

throughout.

The establishment in early 2000s of the Alliance on Civic Education (ACE),² a project-based network of NGOs, signified a renewed attempt to conduct human rights education in Hong Kong. This time ACE decided to take the issue-based approach and experiential learning as major means to promote human rights education, and secondary school students and teachers as main target.

The project I present here is a recent work done by ACE.

Project SPC³

SPC is a co-educational college in Hong Kong. It is a new school staffed with a team of relatively young teachers. Currently the school runs only the first two years of secondary level with a total of roughly 400 students (averaging 13-14 years old). The fact that it is a direct-subsidy school means that (a) the school has greater autonomy in organizing its school curriculum and programs than the majority of the secondary schools in Hong Kong; and (b) many of its students may come from well-off families as they have to pay a monthly tuition

fee while those in other schools do not have to do so.

The school started the project “Learning Without Wall” in late 2005. A total of fourteen programs, mostly overseas exposure trips, are coordinated by the school under this project. Each trip lasts for one week. The basic objective of the project is to broaden the students’ views and life experiences on various subjects. Students can choose their own program of preference. For the 2005 project, thirty-two students chose to stay in Hong Kong.

The planning process began after the Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor (HRM) was approached by a teacher from SPC for assistance regarding programs for this latter group of students. Other members of ACE were called in as it was decided that we would possibly need the staff power of more than one NGO in the actual running of such project. After confirming our partners, we held a number of meetings with two SPC teachers responsible for the project to clarify expectations. We eventually managed to identify objectives and methodologies. Proposals were drafted and revised several times.

In terms of division of tasks, we decided that the teachers would work on the logistic side (including the budget) of the project, while the NGOs would design, coordinate and actually run the programs. The planning stage ended with a briefing session with parents, upon the initiative of the school. Most parents were keen about the opportunities for their children to expose themselves to various social issues of concern. Some parents at the same time have remained cautious, if not skeptical, when the project was referred to as “human rights education”.

When HRM contacted other members of ACE to join the project, Amnesty International Hong Kong Section (AIHK) and the Hong Kong Christian Institute (HKCI) promptly responded.

In the final proposal, we identified the theme, objectives and the program contents of

the project. We decided to make the rights of the child as the core issue to be brought up. We also decided to do it with a softer approach.

Hence instead of starting with the child rights, we designed the programs in a way that students would be encouraged to meet with, learn about the life situations of, children from different social sectors in Hong Kong. We hoped that at the end of the project, students would be able to have some kind of profile of children in Hong Kong. Four social sectors of concern were eventually identified – children in economic difficulties, differently-abled children, ethnic minority children, and children on campus.

In choosing the sectors and in designing the activities for each day’s program, we discussed a lot on how students might relate themselves to the children we intended to visit. We especially wished to avoid the possible superiority complex or patronizing attitude that students might assume. We decided that briefing and debriefing sessions would be crucial.

The program

The program had the following theme: “Teens of Hong Kong - Our Future.” It had these objectives:

- To introduce to students the basic concepts of human rights – respect, dignity, non-discrimination, equal opportunity
- To sensitize them on life situations of children in different sectors of the Hong Kong society - those in poverty, handicapped, studying in band-3 local school, belonging to ethnic minorities
- To give an initial introduction of child rights.

The participants consisted of thirty-two students (boys and girls) of Forms One and Two (Grades 7 and 8) averaging 13-14 years old.

The daily program activities are described below:

Date	Program Outline	Issues/Concepts of Concern
15-17 May	3-day Camp Role-play, community walk (4 districts), games, movie viewing	Basic concepts of human rights Human dignity, non-discrimination, equal opportunity Rights-based approach to poverty
18 May (AM)	Visit: School for Children with Disability Tour around school, meeting with school teachers and social worker, dialogue with students with disability	Needs and rights of children with disability
19 May (PM)	Visit: Local School Tour around school, conversation with principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Life in local school • Child rights on campus
20 May (Full Day)	Visit: Primary School for Ethnic Minorities Lunch with traditional food prepared by students of the primary school and SPC, fun day with games and competitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial discrimination • Cultural diversity
21 May (PM)	Forum/Workshop Guests: (1) Working Group on Children Council, (2) Hongkong Secondary Students Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying children rights • Rights in action • Right to participation

Program Implementation

The program included a 3-day camp and 3 school visits to meet with children from different social sectors.

In the camp, volunteers were recruited to become team leaders for group discussion. One of them was a participant in our previous projects. Indeed it has always been our intention to recruit participants of our former training programs to be our working partners.

The last day of the program was organized in the form of a small workshop in which two student groups, composed mainly of secondary students, were invited to the SPC School to share with the participants their thoughts and the actions they have taken to protect and promote human rights. The main purpose of the session, apart from giving a chance to the participants to reflect on their experiences from the project, was to highlight the idea that human rights are not just a matter for learning but their protection requires action.

Initial feedback

Even though the teachers have not yet provided us with a report on the feedback of the students, we have initial reports from the students on the last day of the program. The general response was positive.

Examples of the initial feedback from students presented on the last day of the program are the following:

“I’m most impressed by the camp cos this is the first time I heard about human rights...”

“I find ethnic minority people very friendly, not quite like what we thought before...”

“I’m really touched by the handicapped students, they work very hard in spite of their physical constraints...”

Reflections on the experience

Project SPC is quite typical of the projects

ACE undertook during the last couple of years though the background of schools and students involved differ.

First, the projects have always been initiated by the teachers/schools mainly because they need help, especially when they do not have sufficient knowledge on a particular issue of concern or do not have enough staff power to facilitate experiential learning, as required in the new educational policy of Hong Kong.

NGO initiatives do not always get responses from schools. Many schools still view NGOs as politically-driven and biased.

As the initiatives often come from the schools, we very often have to tailor-make the programs to suit specific needs, expectations and agenda of a particular school. This usually means a lot of labor-intensive work, designing games, worksheets, info pack, etc.

In the actual implementation of the program, the joint efforts of the NGOs could also mean the need to heavily invest on labor and other resources. In the case of Project SPC, we had to send a total of 3-4 staff with an average of two volunteers, to conduct each session of the program for a whole week.

I observe that even though human rights educators are well-armed with human rights knowledge and concepts, they are not readily equipped with the skills and techniques required to work with students. The NGO workers' inadequacy in skills and pedagogies is sometimes reflected in our complaints about students' passiveness and unwillingness to partake in activities or in expressing themselves. This is especially true in Hong Kong where secondary students in particular are often seen as in-expressive and socially or politically apathetic. But our experiences in the 3rd and 4th programs were revealing when we saw how a group of apparently quiet and uninterested students turned enthusiastic on the issues of concern with a lively guest speaker who knew how to use the language of the children/ students in his/her presentations, etc.

Regarding the possible role confusion, there

always remains a question on the extent of work the NGO educators should do in collaboration with teachers.

To my mind, the best model for work should be this: instead of doing the actual job of teaching students, NGO educators should spend time and resources on training-the-trainers or on producing teaching materials.

It seems to me that the current model, with which we tailor-make projects for individual schools and we replace teachers in the actual teaching work, is used very much because teachers cannot conduct human rights education on their own due to lack of knowledge, time, resources and support, etc. This is stretching much of our energy and resources.

As human rights education is not in the formal school curriculum, projects that are initiated by schools and teachers, just like this project, are often simply intended as extracurricular activities. They are undertaken to fill any gap left from the formal curricular requirements or to occupy students' free time. They are therefore often short term, piecemeal projects with not much initiative for follow-up, or development of vision or perspective.

However, having said that, I still highlight some positive elements I see from our current mode of work.

Firstly, the projects are avenues for training/sensitizing teachers. As teachers go through the program with us, they are enabled on certain issues of concern, especially if we share with them the teaching materials we have prepared.

Secondly, collaboration among NGOs means stronger NGO networking and better sharing of materials and labor resources among ourselves.

Occasionally, we may identify teachers with whom we can develop more long-term partnership. At least one teacher now has become a core member of ACE.

Endnotes

¹ See Yan Wing Leung, “A Brief Review of the Development of Human Rights Education in Schools in Hong Kong: Difficulties and Challenges” (draft) in *International Conference on Human Rights Education in a Diverse and Changing Asia - Conference Proceedings* (Taipei: International Human Rights Education Consortium and Chang Fo-Chuan Center for the Study of Human Rights, 2006).

² Current members of ACE: Amnesty International Hong Kong Section, Centre for Citizenship Education at Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd), Hong Kong Christian Institute, Hong Kong Human Rights Monitor, Hong Kong Informal Education Research Centre, and Justice and Peace Commission of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese. The convener of ACE is Dr. Yan Wing Leung, co-head of Centre for Citizenship Education, HKIEd.

³ In order not to expose the school where the project was implemented, I identify it only as SPC.