

Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Rights of Children in Hong Kong



January 2005

By the Children's Council Working Committee

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A Report
made By
Children
and For
Children
of
Hong Kong

About the Children's Council Working Committee



To commemorate the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) coming into effect, three non-governmental organizations including Against Child Abuse, Hong Kong Committee for UNICEF and Hong Kong Committee on Children's Rights jointly organized the UNCRC – Child Ambassadors' Scheme in September 2000, with the sponsorship of the Hong Kong Home Affairs Bureau. Through public recruitment, 20 children aged between 12 and 16 years old, were selected as UNCRC – Child Ambassadors.

In September 2001, the Child Ambassadors had an exchange visit to Switzerland where they had a short but fruitful meeting with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. They also met representatives of the Children's Parliament of Lucerne. Through the experience, the idea of setting up a similar child-led organization in Hong Kong grew in their minds.

After two years of training and promoting children's rights to the public, they soon felt that it was time to put their idea of setting up a children's council into action. Therefore in 2002, Hong Kong's first Children's Council was established. The first Children's Council Meeting was held in March 2003 in the Legislative Council Building, truly exercising children's right to participation. 60 Child Councilors, aged below 18, moved and discussed five motions that were deeply related to children.

The success of the first Children's Council made both the organizers and participants believe that Children's Council could ultimately become a permanent and effective channel for all children in Hong Kong to express their opinions. Thus, Child Ambassadors together with the Child Councilors from the first Children's Council established "The Children's Council Working Committee" in which they jointly organized and implemented the second Children's Council with the three organizations.

After the second Children's Council Meeting, it becomes like a tradition that Child Councilors who are interested in promoting children's rights would join in "The Children's Council Working Committee" and help organize with various activities. Till now, the Committee has around 80 members.

The Children's Council Working Committee now strives hard to actualize the concept of "children speaking for children" by collecting views from as many children as possible so that Hong Kong children's views can be truly represented and heard.

Some Notes on the Report



In this report, we will share our views on child right issues in Hong Kong. The views and opinions were child-related issues being discussed in the Children's Council Meetings for and by children in the past two years. The motion papers in 2003 were formulated by the Child Councilors through 60 meetings from the first Children's Council project; while the motion papers in 2004 were formulated by the Child Councilors through about 40 meetings from the second Children's Council project. More than 9,000 children were surveyed and consulted for the motions during these two years.

This report is mainly compiled from the aforementioned motion papers. As our mother-tongue language is Chinese, most of the motion papers were written in Chinese and were translated into English with the kind assistance of the Centre for Translation and the BA (Hons in Translation degree programme of the Hong Kong Baptist University). Please kindly note that there are no comments made concerning section II (Definition of the Child) and section V (Family Environment and Alternative Care). As our motion papers within the two years have not been studying matters concerning these two sections, we feel that it would be inappropriate to give a shallow comment without in-depth study. We would be more than delighted to share our views on matters concerning the two sections in the future after thorough discussion.

We sincerely hope that our voices can make an influence and impact on the Hong Kong Government's future decisions and policies.





Report under the Convention on the Rights of the Child

1. SECTION I: GENERAL MEASURES OF IMPLEMENTATION

Article 4: Implementation of rights

- 1.1 In Hong Kong, there lacks a central mechanism to coordinate child-related issues. Thus, we hope the government can make special efforts for the children of Hong Kong by setting up a Child Commission. Up till now, Hong Kong has Commissions for women, elderly and youth, yet we still lack a Commission for the most valuable group in society – children.
- 1.2 As children, we support the idea of setting up a Child Commission in Hong Kong. We think the Commission, if there is one, should play an important role in serving the best interest of the child. In the following, we would like to suggest the functions and structure of the Child Commission we have in mind.
- 1.3 The functions are:
 - (i) To ensure the UNCRC to be implemented smoothly in Hong Kong;
 - (ii) To review laws, policies that are related to children;
 - (iii) To foster the community culture that concerns the best interest of children, their needs, rights and responsibilities;
 - (iv) To advise the government on matters pertaining to children
 - (v) To exchange ideas and information with child related organizations and working groups on children matters to ensure that the interests of children are taken into account when designing relevant programs;
 - (vi) To gather information and conduct researches on children matters; and
 - (vii) To provide child-friendly versions of government documents concerning children
- 1.4 The structure of the Commission should have children as members for expressing their opinions and making suggestions. Representatives of child related organizations and working child psychologists and social workers should be involved as well.
- 1.5 We strongly urge a Child Commission to be set up in Hong Kong to ensure children's rights are protected in Hong Kong.

2. SECTION III: GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Article 6: The right to life, survival and development

- 2.1 Children in poverty are living in extremely hostile environments, with some even having to wander the streets just to collect paper cartons and aluminium cans to help out their families. These children suffer greatly both physiologically and psychologically. Their basic needs of clothing, nutrition, housing and transportation are not satisfied; their rights to life and development are deprived. A survey conducted by Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) shows that around 30,000 impoverished children are now living in small partitioned rooms, bed space apartments (also known as caged homes) and places alike.
- 2.2 Furthermore, to the children in poverty, a basic adequate diet is already a “privilege” to them. These children therefore have a higher potential in suffering from malnutrition. Their growth is stunted; they tend to fall ill more easily.
- 2.3 Children who live in partitioned rooms or bed space apartments may also suffer from abnormal development in their spinal cords due to a severe lack of maneuverable space. This clearly affects their development.

Article 12: Respect for the views of the child

- 2.4 Hong Kong’s first Children’s Council was established in 2003. Five groups of Child Councilors discussed five child-related topics in the Hong Kong Legislative Council Building. The motions from various groups of children in the council were sent to relative government departments after the Council Meeting. Disappointedly, little feedback was given to us by various government departments concerning the issues addressed in the reports. To a certain extent, we as children feel that our views have been overlooked and our efforts unappreciated. We truly hope that proper respect and attention can be given to children’s views in the near future.
- 2.5 According to Article 12 of the UNCRC, when a child “is capable of forming his or her own views”, their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. However, Hong Kong Government does not have an effective and open channel which encourages Hong Kong children to speak up. The Children’s Council Working Committee is now working hard to achieve our goal in setting up a permanent Children’s Council – a platform for children to express their opinions on issues concerning them. It will be a great opportunity to truly exercise the rights to participation in Hong Kong. Yet, we feel disappointed that we do not have much support or attention from both the public and the government.

- 2.6 Moreover, many policies concerning children in Hong Kong, such as education reforms and child welfare are often implemented without consulting children's opinion. We believe that this is against the spirit behind Article 12 of the UNCRC. As children will be the ones directly affected by these policies, it is best that their ideas and wants are listened to before implementing these child-related policies.
- 2.7 The education system in Hong Kong is often criticised as "spoon-feeding" and "training-oriented", and students lack initiative and creativity. In view of this, the Education Commission suggested a series of reform measures, such as "mother-tongue education" and "through-road" to improve the system. Unfortunately, these measures are not tailor-made to children's needs and are changing frequently, leading to a lot of setback and confusion. 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. Without really having children participating in it, education reform cannot conform to the needs and the expectations of children.
- 2.8 Here is one clear example. Under the present education system in Hong Kong, the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) is a free-standing advisory body appointed by the Chief Executive of Hong Kong to give advice on all matters relating to curriculum development for the school system from kindergarten to the sixth form of secondary school. Before the CDC gives advice to the government or makes any suggestions of improvement in the curriculum, it carries out researches and uses different ways to collect opinions from the society. They include academics, teachers and parents, but not students.
- 2.9 We are 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. We strongly believe that with children's ideas, curriculum development would be made more efficiently and successfully. The curriculum would be more suitable for students.
- 2.10 In an interview conducted with Professor Wong Yuk Shan, Chairman of the CDC in 2003, Professor Wong agreed that student participation is vital. He said that we could 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. They may also be afraid that their opinions will not be accepted. Professor Wong also said 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).

2.11 Members of the CDCSC are to collect opinions from students of diversified backgrounds. Opinions could be collected through letters, emails, faxes, message boards and opinion boxes in schools and discussion forums on the Internet. 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 held once a month. Any topics raised in the CDCSC should be discussed thoroughly until a consensus is made. Approved proposals will be sent to the CDC. Furthermore, members should have the right to sit in meetings of the CDC on relevant issues. The CDC 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 government to ensure students are fully informed of the possible changes.

2.12 To obtain opinions from students, teachers and school principals of our proposal of setting up a CDCSC in Hong Kong, we successfully carried out a survey in 15 schools randomly ranging from Band I to III during January and February in 2003. More than 3,000 students, 140 teachers and principals had completed and returned the questionnaires. The results were encouraging. 84% of students agreed to 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 receiver of education, their right to be involved in curriculum development should be exercised. 70% of them thought that children participation in curriculum development was possible. In conclusion, 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.

2.13 In addition, over 70% of teachers agreed that children should have the right to participate in curriculum development. The data also showed that 74% of the teachers are not satisfied with the present syllabus. They wanted to have it regulated. 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 CDC. 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.

- 2.14 To conclude, we believe that children are competent of giving sound suggestions on matters concerning them. It is reasonable to carry out measures to ensure the right to participation of children is respected. With the participation of children, professional planners would get a fuller picture of the real needs and interest of children directly. Better policies will thus be able to be formulated.

3. SECTION IV: CIVIL RIGHTS AND FREEDOM

Article 16: Protection of privacy

- 3.1 As mentioned in 2.1, many impoverished children now live in small partitioned rooms, bed space apartments and places alike. Their average living area per person is only 22 square feet, the smallest among them is a mere 10 square feet, a far cry from the standard of 70 square feet set by the Housing Authority. Children in such dwellings have to share facilities such as toilets and kitchens with other tenants, constituting an extremely unfavorable mode of living, not to mention a complete lack of privacy.

Article 19: Abuse and neglect

- 3.2 Hong Kong has a mixed culture of Chinese and western elements, however, many parents in Hong Kong still believed in traditional Chinese teaching ways, "physical punishment gives you a filial child". Besides, the sluggish economy depresses many adults, who may take it out on their children. Unfortunately, children cannot defend themselves, being weak and passive.
- 3.3 As a general guide, child abuse is defined as any act of commission or omission that endangers or impairs a child's physical/psychological health and development. As child abuse is such an important issue and can cause permanent damage to children, we propose that the government implement mandatory education for parents.
- 3.4 We have conducted a questionnaire survey in 4 schools and in various districts during the period of January and February in 2003. The targets of our survey are parents and children. We have collected 450 valid replies. According to our survey, close to 50% of the respondents thought that the child abuse problem in Hong Kong was only moderate. In fact, according to government statistics, the number of newly registered child abuse cases has increased in recent years, from 311 cases in 1996 to 535 cases in 2001. Most cases involved physical abuse. The second most extensive form of abuse is sexual harassment.

- 3.5 At present, parent education concerning child abuse is inadequate in Hong Kong. With the mandatory education, we believe it can help establish a harmonious relationship between parents and children, and prevent children from being abused. Through parent education, we could educate the parents about the attitudes needed for good parenting.
- 3.6 Some people may be worried that when the proposal is carried out, it will meet with a lot of objections, especially from the parents. But in fact, most of the parents who abuse their children turn to violence only as the last resort or because they do not know anything about child abuse and its consequences. These parents want to make a good job of parenting but they often find themselves in a helpless position.
- 3.7 Mandatory parent education is an effective channel to bring the right messages to all parents and provide them with assistance and guidance. This is why we think it can help lessen the child abuse situation in Hong Kong.

Article 37(a): The right not to be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

- 3.8 Hong Kong reported last year that there were about 1,600 cases of school bullying. In a simple survey among the Child Councilors in March 2004, it showed that half of the participants of the Children's Council said that they had seen bullying in school. This showed that children cannot be well protected even when they are studying in school. Children could be humiliated and punished by family members, classmates, teachers and strangers anywhere.
- 3.9 Corporal punishment used in the family can also cause both psychological and physical damage to children. Some parents swear at their children and others limit a child's freedom. Physical punishment such as slapping on the hand and caning are still used in many families.
- 3.10 As the problem still exists in Hong Kong, we think the implementation of Article 37(a) is not very successful. We hope the government can provide more education to the Hong Kong people especially parents and potential parents. We also wish the government can have a real children's policy to look into the matters as soon as possible. The followings are some of our suggested solutions to the problem:
- Incorporating moral education into the school curriculum
 - Introducing anti-bullying policy
 - Establishing concern groups in schools

- Setting up a reporting mechanism
- Implementing a police officer attachment program in high-risk schools
- Implementing small class education

4. SECTION VI: BASIC HEALTH AND WELFARE

Article 24: Access to health care services

4.1 Quality of the Student Health Service

The Student Health Service in Hong Kong fails to take full care of the students' psychological health. A survey we have conducted indicates that parents generally think that the Student Health Service does not provide sufficient assessment of children's psychological problems. Therefore, we hope that the government departments concerned would enhance the scheme by setting up a more effective mechanism for psychological assessment. To enable students with psychological problems to seek help from their teachers, it is advisable to send the assessment reports to the schools so that the teachers could take follow-up actions. Furthermore, figures from the Student Health Service of the Department of Health showed that the number of students who participated in the scheme in the previous school year was slightly more than half of the total number of eligible students in Hong Kong. Our survey also showed that some parents left the scheme because the assessment provided was not comprehensive enough. All these proved that there are deficiencies in the scheme. The Government should improve the quality of the scheme so as to encourage more students to take part in it and to ensure that their health is protected.

4.2 School Dental Care Service

The present School Dental Care Service in Hong Kong only covers primary school students. As most of the secondary school students are still under 18, government should extend the service to secondary school students so as to ensure that all children are being taken care of.

4.3 Education and Promotional Work on Child Health Policies

From our survey group of 363 primary school students in a survey conducted in January and February in 2003, 56% of the respondents are unaware of the medical services provided to them. Also, from our research, only 39% of 547 parents interviewed, agreed that government promotion is sufficient and informative enough for them to understand the medical services that are provided to their children. More education and promotional work on the child health policies are obviously needed.

4.4 Space in Pediatric Wards

Due to limited spacing in Hong Kong, only 16 government hospitals have pediatric wards. There are inadequate rooms and space for parents to stay with their children overnight. In some cases, children that are close to 18 years old of age will be treated as an adult, having to stay in the adults ward depriving their rights to special care and help.

4.5 Play Services

Play services still are not encouraged by the government in pediatric wards. To our knowledge, the few play specialists that are present in certain hospitals are not government funded. As a result, the number of play specialists is actually decreasing due to funding difficulties within hospitals. The existence of play specialists is essentially important to hospitalized children as they are able to lessen the fear and enable children to recuperate at a higher speed.

4.6 No Pediatric Hospital

There is no pediatric hospital in Hong Kong. We believe that a pediatric hospital with one-stop integrated medical service can give better care to children. We also suggest the government systematize all information in pediatric hospitals.

4.7 Child Health Policies

Improving and forming an overall child health policy is needed. According to the UNCRC, children are a group with special needs of their own. However, we are unaware of the government announcing any official child health policies. Different departments often take care of different parts of the child health services. There is a lack of coordination between departments, therefore a thorough child health policy is needed to organize the whole child health service system.

Article 26: The child's right to social security benefit

- 4.8 Articles 26 states that State Parties recognize for every child the right to benefit from social security. The Hong Kong government is currently offering Comprehensive Social Security Assistance (CSSA) to households in need. However, the categories of payments covered are both inadequate and inflexible. Children in poverty cannot truly benefit from the scheme. In 1999, the Social Welfare Department slashed the standard rates by 10% to 20% based on the number of members in a household and cut down the types of special grants, i.e. grants for monthly telephone fees, purchase of spectacles and dental treatment, long-term supplement and re-accommodation grants. In 2003, there was a further reduction of 11.1% in standard rates and rent allowance was cut by 15.8%, single parent supplement and meal allowance for full-day students by 11.1% and grants to cover school fees by 7.7%. In essence, a four-person

household has suffered a 40.1% cut in total CSSA payments in the two reviews and the adjusted standard rates amount to a mere \$5,090. The monthly payment to cover the living expenses of a child is only \$1,275 which is a staggering 31.6% shy of the minimum standard of living in Hong Kong.

- 4.9 Society for Community Organization conducted a research in 2004 concerning the living standards of children currently receiving CSSA. Statistics showed that performance of these children in aspects such as nutrition, development, social contact or even the feeling of self-respect, have been particularly low. As the number of children receiving CSSA is increasing rapidly these years, if nothing was done to solve the problems faced by the children, their situation would surely become even worse.

Article 27: Standard of living

- 4.10 In Article 27, it states that States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. However, what we see in Hong Kong is that these elements concerning the children living in poverty are being abused severely.
- 4.11 Poverty seriously undermines the physiological and psychological development of children. According to the same findings published by the Society for Community Organization on the Living Standard of the Children on CSSA Survey mentioned in section 4.9, nearly 75% of the families interviewed customarily spread a portion of food that normally serves one meal over two or more meals: in some cases even up to four meals. 40% of the interviewed families said they have had experience of starvation, out of a lack of cash to purchase foodstuff. Children who are not taking an adequate diet will suffer from malnutrition. Their growth is stunted: they fall ill more easily. In such instances when they do fall ill, out of financial considerations they would very often take patented medicines instead of going to private clinics. Or they would choose to go to public hospitals, which require long hours of queuing, or, in worse cases, choose to simply ignore their illnesses. The survey also discovered that children who live in partitioned rooms or bed space apartments may suffer abnormal development in their spinal cords due to a severe lack of maneuverable space.
- 4.12 As showed in 2.1, a survey conducted by Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS) showed that around 30,000 impoverished children are now living in small partitioned rooms, bedspace apartments (also known as caged homes) and places alike. The hygienic conditions of these places are poor and the environment are usually heavily polluted. Adding in a rowdy neighbourhood where the children are easily subjected to malignant influence and bullying from malicious individuals, it is little wonder that they are often in want of a sense of security.

4.13 Apart from a favourable studying environment, children in poverty also lack computers which would otherwise facilitate and support a diverse mode of learning, and this proves to be a great inconvenience for their studies. According to the same survey on the Living Standard of the Children on CSSA, only about 30% of the interviewees attended tutorial classes although as high as over 60% considered themselves in need of it. The main reason for this is the high tuition fees which are beyond the capabilities of these impoverished households. The need to purchase textbooks and reference materials are proving a heavy burden too for impoverished families, with their annual raise in prices and the frequent release of new editions. Moreover, these children are unable to join extra-curricular activities they are interested in, thus undermining their physical and psychological developments.

4.14 More importantly, among the children in poverty in Hong Kong, about 20% of them have to help their family collect paper cartons and empty cans for petty cash as a means of livelihood. Nevertheless, quite a number of these children professed a reluctance to apply for CSSA even though they are eligible for assistance, for they found it humiliating. Faced with financial difficulties, money is often a cause of worry for them, and they tend to develop a dislike for their present way of living. It is thus obvious that the issue of poverty has a detrimental effect on impoverished children, not only physiologically but also psychologically.

4.15 In conclusion, the basic needs of clothing, nutrition, housing and transportation are not satisfied: their rights to live and develop are deprived. These have a profound impact on the growth of children in poverty. The government should address this issue directly and take a greater sense of urgency to map out policies which will ensure basic living standards for these children.

5. SECTION VII: EDUCATION, LEISURE AND CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

Article 28: Right to education

Integrated Education in Hong Kong

5.1 Children with special educational needs only constitute a minority in the society of Hong Kong and are always being neglected. In school, they are regarded as students who would slow down other children's progress; while in society, they are seen as a heavy burden to the public. In 1995, the Hong Kong Government spotted the inequalities the children suffered and enacted the Disability Discrimination Ordinance, the Code of Practice on Education to ensure the equal opportunity on education of the children. Integrated education has then been introduced since 1997 and enables children with special educational needs to enjoy equal opportunities

to study, just as normal children do. At the same time provides normal children with an opportunity to relate to children with special educational needs, and to understand that people with different abilities in our society will naturally have different needs.

- 5.2 Since the implementation of integrated education, there have been annual increases in the number of schools participating in the scheme from 9 in 1997 pilot project to about 110 in 2002.
- 5.3 Still, integrated education in many schools that has admitted children with special educational needs failed to provide effective service. The lack of initiative is in fact the major drawback of integrated education in Hong Kong.
- 5.4 Although schools in Hong Kong admit students under the Integrated Education Program, it is often the students and their parents who take the initiative to adapt themselves to the schools. The integrated education in Hong Kong is different from the inclusion education in foreign countries where the schools take the initiative to adjust them to meet the needs of their students. Adjustment is needed in basic hardware such as corridors, equipment and environment. Even more important is the adaptation of software such as a redesign of the government promotion materials, the adoption of alternative assessment methods, and, above all, change in attitudes and beliefs. For instance, in examinations, instead of written answers, students should be allowed to do drawings or give oral presentations and assessment and grading of these students' performance should vary according to their backgrounds. Indeed, "inclusive education" should be the ideal model of integrated education. However, integrated education in Hong Kong has not achieved any of these goals and is in fact far from being "inclusive".
- 5.5 We strongly believe that it is the responsibility of the government to work for the good of the people and to provide them with equal education opportunities. In order to ensure that the idea of integrated education would be widely accepted and become the prevailing trend in schools, government assistance is indispensable.
- 5.6 We have the following suggested approaches:
 - Civic education should be strengthened by the Government to help the public acquire a correct understanding of children with special educational needs. This can be done through promotion on television and radio, through television programs about children with special educational needs, as well as organizing events such as Integrated Education Week.
 - A standing advisory and supervision body should be formed under the Education and Manpower Bureau in order to improve the structure of integrated education.
 - With regard to the training of teachers, regulations should be made to ensure that all would-be teachers must study subjects on children with special educational needs. Meanwhile, the quality of these subjects should be enhanced to enable the teachers to gain an in-depth understanding of children with special educational needs and to raise teaching quality.

- More resources should be allocated to schools for attending to children with special educational needs.
- A long-term policy should be formulated to help children with special educational needs.
- A value-added integrated education index should be set up to encourage more schools to run integrated education.
- An award scheme should be set up to commend children and schools that have done well in integrated education.
- A column of integrated schools should be added to the school selection list for primary and secondary schools. The list should be updated annually so that parents would know better about them.

Children in Poverty Deprived of Proper Education

5.7 The economy of Hong Kong lays stress on the development of high technology and service industry. The demands of the economy are changing fast, any society that hopes to stay competitive and prosperous will find itself in dire need of different talents who are creative, innovative, and adaptable. The future of our society will also depend on the successful nurturing of a younger generation who are capable of independent thinking, who are fully aware of their own potentials and responsibilities, and who are keen to update their skills and expertise throughout life. Nowadays in Hong Kong, the extreme disparity between the rich and poor tends to be more serious. Inside the society, effect of poverty on children is always been ignored. The rights for them are not being respected. From the Survey on Children's Living Conditions in Old Urban Areas, children living in poverty even cannot own some basic facilities for studying like computer, desk, or even a set of stationery. Moreover, because of their own financial problem, they may have difficulties and worries about their educational resources. The development of high technology and use of computers are very important now. Under this situation, the result of gap in knowledge of the high technology and use of computers would seriously affect these children and they would fail to grow up properly. It is important to improve their conditions and stop the poverty cycle.

5.8 The aim of education should be to provide the best means for the students, let them learn best what they want to learn. However, though there is government assistance for schooling fee, textbook and transport costs. We believe that not all of the children's basic needs can be covered by the existing system. The subsidies of the government towards the children are focused on regular education, but not on the development of children as a whole. While understanding the financial pressure, many children tend to suppress their needs; even they are just very basic extra-curricular activities for other children. As a result, their chances of thorough learning reduced.

- 5.9 These children are now in need of help from the government. The government ought to adjust the policies in view of Article 28 of the UNCRC.

Article 31: Leisure, recreation and cultural activities

Children in Poverty Deprived of Leisure Activities

- 5.10 According to Article 31, States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and arts. However, a lot of children in poverty are living in poor conditions in Hong Kong. For those children, the right to play is like a luxury to them due to the lack of sufficient living area and resources. While suppressing their wants of extra-curricular activities, many of them cannot even invite their friends home because of the small flats they are living in. Their living environments have a significant association with their self-esteem. It makes it difficult for them to meet friends.
- 5.11 The lacking of sufficient living area increases the danger for them to play at home, the stairway or the corridor. They may linger in the park or public area nearby with their friends. It also increases the risk of meeting people with bad influence.
- 5.12 Since subsidies provided to children in poverty by the Education and Manpower Bureau is often not adequate, these students find it particularly hard to join extra-curricular activities which they desire. Many students from low-income families often point out that they were able to take part in activities at school, but there was not a big variety to choose from due to their financial circumstances. Most of them sincerely hope to receive more subsidies from the government, so that they could participate in extra-curricular activities for free, or pay a nominal price.

An overview of the Extra-curricular Activities Organized by Schools in Hong Kong

- 5.13 Organizing diversified extra-curricular activities require enormous funds and resources. Currently, schools in Hong Kong receive operating expenses block grants from the Education and Manpower Bureau and they are free to decide the amount to be spent on individual aspect. Thus, schools normally would deduct the general expenditure from the budget first and then allocate a small portion of the balance for the organization of extra-curricular activities. Since there is no other channel for the schools to apply for extra funding from the government, and the subsidies from alumni donations are usually limited, schools can only normally organize a few extra-curricular activities which are often limited in diversity. This is particularly true of the situation in primary schools. This shows that many students nowadays are not able to choose and take part in activities they like.

5.14 The situation in Hong Kong international schools is, however, different. The great variety of extra-curricular activities available in international schools enables students to learn a wide range of knowledge and skills. Students often gain a greater sense of satisfaction and success other than from their routine study. Besides, they can broaden their social circles and horizons as well as deepen their understanding of society through participating in extra-curricular activities, and this will provide them a channel through which they can improve their self-esteem and obtain self-enlightenment.

5.15 Therefore, we suggest that local schools can provide more space and opportunities for students to participate in different kinds of extra-curricular activities.

An Overview of Hong Kong Children's Participation in Extra-curricular Activities

5.16 The Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association of Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, and the Hong Kong Institute of Education Alumni Association have joined together to conduct a "Survey of How School Children Spend their Leisure Time in Hong Kong (2002)". 37 primary and 330 secondary schools were surveyed by means of a questionnaire and 2,160 valid questionnaires were collected.

5.17 The result of the survey reveals the following problems:

- There is an increasing greater variety of after-school home activities, but they are basically static activities.
- Children mostly stay at home to watch television (20.1%), and children playing computer games or surfing on the Internet at home is also becoming increasingly common (14.2%).
- Children now spend more time on after-school tutorial lessons than before.
47.1 % of school children take tutorial lessons after school. The average time they spend on this is 4 hours 47 minutes per week and the median is 3 hours.
- There is too much pressure from studies.
In order to cope with the pressure from the heavy burden of homework and examination, many children spend more and more time on studying, thus reducing the time and opportunity they have for participating in extra-curricular activities.
- There has been a change in the reasons why children do not participate in extra-curricular activities. By 2002, more and more children were not able to participate in extra-curricular activities either because the charges were too high, or because there was no time or no suitable time.

5.18 To sum up, we can conclude that extra-curricular activities contribute greatly to the physical and psychological development of children. Extra-curricular activities are generally popular with students, but due to the various reasons mentioned above, they are not able to take an active part in these activities.

5.19 In conclusion, we suggest that the government should provide funding to schools and organizations to organize extra-curricular activities of a greater variety and higher quality. Schools should also be encouraged to set up their own panels to coordinate and design extra-curricular activities.

6. SECTION VIII: SPECIAL PROTECTION MEASURES

Article 32: Economic exploitation, including child labour

6.1 In Hong Kong, we have 《The Employment of Children Regulations》 to ensure that there is no exploitation of child labour. 《The Employment of Children Regulations》 states that the government prohibits the employment of children aged under 15 in industrial undertakings. Children aged 13 and 14 years may work in non-industrial establishments, subject to stringent restrictions imposed by the Regulations in order to ensure their full-time schooling and protect their safety, health, and welfare.

6.2 Although we have these regulations, child labours still appear in Hong Kong.

6.3 According to the result of a survey conducted by the Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS) mentioned in 2.1, 20% of the children in poverty in Hong Kong have to help their family collect paper cartons and empty cans for petty cash as means of livelihood. Faced with financial difficulties, money is often a cause of worry for them, and they tend to develop a dislike for their present way of living. It is thus obvious that the issue of poverty has a detrimental effect on impoverished children, not only physiologically but also psychologically.

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