

Youth Empowerment – "Let the Dolphin Lead"

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Introduction

"A French physician is said to have always taught his paediatric students, 'Listen to the mother: she is giving you the diagnosis'. In the context of our present topic, he might have said: 'Listen to the child: he or she may hold a key to your understanding of the problem – and to its resolution'." (Davie, Upton & Varma, 1996)

"Each of the three will have different knowledge, wishes, expectations, concerns and feelings which will influence the resultant interaction (Pearce, 1994). The child's, parent's and professional's voices do not, however, carry equal weight, and are not equally articulated, heard or acknowledged. Nor are their positions necessarily independent of each other's." (Davie, Upton & Varma 1996)

When you were a child or a teenage, have you ever thought of what kind of society you expect to live in? Have you had some thoughts that you would like to tell your parents and teachers, but you dare not to say? Children and youths have their own feelings and thoughts regarding people and issues around them, but are there enough opportunities and channels to voice their views and do they feel safe enough to reveal their inner world in our society?

In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC),³ it clearly stated that all rights apply to all children without exception. It is the State's obligation to protect children from any form of discrimination and to take positive action to promote their rights. (Art. 2) The child has the right to express his or her opinion freely and to have that opinion taken into account in any matter or procedure affecting the child. (Art. 12) The child has the right to express his or her views, obtain information, make ideas or information known regardless of frontiers. The States shall respect the child's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, subject to appropriate parental guidance. (Art. 13 & 14) Education shall aim at developing the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the fullest extent. Education shall prepare the child for an active adult life in a free society and foster respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, and for the cultural background and values of others. (Art. 29)

Youth Empowerment – Let the Dolphin Lead

We believe that children have rights and as adult working with and for children have obligations. It is

important to develop a commitment to children's rights and this commitment has to come from the heart and supported by information and action. In 1998, a pilot project "Let the Dolphin Lead" initiated by Against Child Abuse was launched and continued in 1999. Dolphin was chosen as the mammal representing Hong Kong and it symbolises our children and youth who were full of energy, hope, life and strength. The "Let the Dolphin Lead" project was an educational project which aimed at empowering children and youth, through active participation and extensive involvement, in structured activities to formulate their ideal plan for a non-violent society. "Empowerment gives people the opportunity and necessary resources so they can believe, understand and change their world," noted Joseph F. Lagana, Associate Executive Director, Allegheny Intermediate Unit, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To cultivate a safe environment for children's growth, to educate and empower children and youth to become responsible and sensible individuals become an important area in our work.

The objectives of the project were to provide children and youth with opportunities to express their views, to identify their own as well as those in the society which hinder their optimal growth and development and to draw up a plan with them for the betterment of a caring, non-violent and safe living environment. It was our intention to help them to acquire confidence, positive values of life, knowledge and skills so that they can set proper priorities in life, and to voice their own opinions as well as to join in decision making in areas of their concern.

The project was designed and implemented in three phases:

Phase I: Dolphin Volunteers Training

Around 50 volunteers aged 18 to 25 were recruited, trained and empowered to become leaders to lead younger youths and children. The training includes understanding of child abuse, child protection services and children's rights, knowledge about children's needs and development, self understanding, leadership training, communication skills, team building, creative art work training and program planning for children in the Dolphin Workshop of Phase II. Channels were offered for these Dolphin volunteers to learn and grow, their potentials and creativities were explored and contributed in the process of planning and preparation.

In the last year, one of the volunteers felt that the Dolphin Project had provided ample opportunity for him to plan, design and decide. It was a great satisfaction and encouragement that his abilities and potentials were appreciated and affirmed. He wished that more similar projects be arranged for youths, so that their creativity and productive parts would benefit others in the society.

Phase II: Children Workshop

A number of around 200 students from P.3 to F.3 were invited to participate in the workshop. They were facilitated to express their feelings and thoughts through dance, drama and art work, etc. to the Government, family, school and mass media.

In the last year, some children initially felt that they did not have power to change the Government, but they made a sculpture of the Chief Executive who has a big head which symbolized that they expected him to have a comprehensive plan for a safe, stable and non-violent society. A pair of big ears were also sculptured symbolizing the Chief Executive should always be open and willing to listen to their needs and views.

For the family, they expressed that they wanted to be listened to, to be loved and cared for. One of the pictures drawn showing their wish of not being left unattended at home, and another picture shown that they did not want to be punished physically. They expected parents could spend more quality time with them. Due to the recent economic recession, some children expressed their worries of parents being laid off and some showed concerns about conflicts caused by working in Mainland China.

In school, the children wanted their teacher would be more understanding and would communicate with them. Less examination and homework, but spend more time on creative learning and activities. Some children voiced that they had seen the "ugly", emotional and exhausted faces of their teachers and they did not like it. They did not enjoy school life because all the time was spent in writing, dictation, test and examination. One group of children presented that they would like to set up a cemetery in school to threaten and punish those "naughty" pupils. A lot more has to be explored on this idea of setting up a cemetery in school. What did it represent? How would they feel about threat and punishment? And how to cultivate a positive life value for our children? There are so much to be further explored in the children's inner world and there are so much to be done to help them to develop a positive life value and attitude.

Children were used to violence and pornographic pictures and scenes on daily newspaper, magazines and some television programs. Children in the workshop presented that they had little choices, and they were not aware of any channel which they could express their views about mass media. They expected more quality programs would be produced so that they could have more choices.

Phase III: Declaration

Voices of these children were collected and consolidated in a form of "Dolphin Declaration". A

ceremony and an exhibition were held in order to raise public awareness. The declaration was also disseminated to the related parties. The followings were some of their voices:

We want our Government to

- be democratic
- against crime and violence
- have a comprehensive housing policy
- increase resources to social welfare
- concern about environmental protection
- revive the economic situation
- provide opportunity for children and youth to participate
- protect children from being abused

We want our family to be a place where

- you feel secure
- there is respect for privacy
- there are no beating and scolding
- there is no comparison
- there are more compliments
- there is more freedom
- there are no worries
- dad and mom have time for children
- dad and mom listen to and trust children
- dad and mom keep their promise
- dad and mom have stable jobs
- everyone is healthy and happy

We want our school to be a place where

- headmaster/mistress and teachers care about students
- they talk to students
- they would not throw temper
- students can create and participate
- there is respect and no discrimination against new immigrants
- less students in a classroom
- there is no stress of examination
- there are exciting things to do
- there are smiling faces
- there are lots of choices
- is clean, tidy and well equipped

We want our mass media to

- be ethical
- be creative, fun and educational
- reduce pornography and violence
- be attentive to children's participation
- provide channels for children to express their views
- respect personal privacy

Conclusion

There are so much in children's heart and mind, we need to be willing to listen and know how to listen. They always surprise us with their talents, creativity and humor. They bring us life and hope. Let's allow them to teach us with their wonder and dreams. To conclude, let's listen to

What Your Children Might Say

Treat me as a person of short stature who simply has less experience than you. Let me laugh and play, for all too soon I will be your size.

Spend time in my universe, with all its wonders, for I often have trouble understanding the priorities of your world. I, like you, am bored with idle conversation, so talk about meaningful things to me. Speak with me, not at me, and use clear language. Please don't pretend I'm not there when you're talking. Set examples with significant actions, not shallow words. Provide me with a definite "yes" or "no" and stick to it. Tell me why and I might surprise you by minding you. Be honest for I can spot a phony right away. The truth works a lot better than manipulation or guilt trips. Furnish me with guidelines; then I won't be testing the rules. Let me manage important parts of my life as soon as I am able. Grant me privacy and time to myself, but still hug me often. Teach me living skills and encourage my creative side. Nurture the fantasies that are very real to me.

Honor all my feelings, as they are neither right nor wrong. Show me that grief is normal when I lose something. Love me for who I am, not what you want me to be. Recognize my value to you, because I am a beautiful being, even when I make the errors that are called experience. Let me know that you are not God; that you make mistakes too. Seek my opinion; I have wisdom in many matters. Guide me toward my personal spirituality. The golden rule applies to me too.

Anonymous
(quoted in Martens, 1995)

References

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Martens K (1995). "Whose Right? A Child's: UNICEF & Radda Barnen Child Rights Training Manual" Bangladesh, Dhaka.

"United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child", printed by the Government Printer, Hong Kong. The Government of the U.K. ratified the Convention in 1991 and in 1994 extended its ratification of the Convention to twelve dependent territories, including Hong Kong. The People's Republic of China ratified the Convention in 1991.

The Child Rearing Approach in an Era of Change

AC LEUNG
Hong Kong

"We used to obey our parents. But children nowadays talk back to their parents."

"I grew up in whips. I am thankful that they have saved me from going astray. Why do people nowadays condemn the whips and indulge the children?"

The above remarks are often heard to be shared among some local parents. It is difficult for them to accept that children nowadays are different from themselves in the old days. They do not recognize that child rearing practices do change with time and culture. In adopting an approach for child rearing, we have to consider the targets, in terms of the time, space and system they are in. Which approach is appropriate? Why? How does it operate? These questions are addressed in this paper with particular reference to the Hong Kong context.

Who?

Who are the targets of child rearing? They are children and parents. Who are the contemporary children, say in the Hong Kong context? Who are the contemporary local parents? Let us take a look of our children and parents, respectively.

Evolving Children

Children born in this era are no longer like sleeping baby cats, as described in our grandparents' days. From my own personal experience, they are wide awake, anticipating to reunite with their parents, once leaving the mother's body. Gibson (1994) reports that newborns, two to four days of age, can already discriminate between their mother's voice and a stranger's voice. Our babies, have evolved, and are not much different from those studied abroad.

Parent Not the Primary Caring Adult

In many families, both parents are working. Children are left to the care of Filipino maids, grandparents, child-minders, friends or relatives who live separately, or even in another region in Mainland China. For these children, their parents have not functioned as their primary caring adult. The parents' way of living have not provided a framework within which children learn to conduct their lives. Discrepancies in their expectations towards each others' behaving are evident.

Media-culture-kids

Almost every household possesses a television. Through the television, children are exposed to ways of living and perspectives different from their own parents.