Voice Matters: How Can a School Listen to Student Voice in School Governance?

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Abstract. This manuscript critically examines the role of student participation in the governance of educational institutions, with a particular focus on the current state of civic education in Hong Kong. The analysis brings to the fore the shortcomings and limited breadth of the existing curriculum programme, spotlighting the imperative need for reform. The manuscript underscores the significance of amplifying students' voices in decision-making processes, stressing the creation of platforms that encourage and facilitate their expression of opinions. The paper presents a suite of potential enhancements that schools could implement to bolster student involvement. These include liberalizing regulations, instituting student councils, and providing more avenues for direct student feedback. The global movement towards greater student agency is duly noted, acknowledging the challenges that schools still face in this transition. However, this paper posits that the active engagement of students in school governance serves as not only a tool for developing their future civic skills, but also an effective strategy for surmounting the obstacles inherent to civic education. In summary, this manuscript accentuates the crucial role of student voice in shaping civic education and cultivating a more inclusive school environment.

Keywords: student voice, school governance, civic education.

1. Introduction

Certain academic studies have indicated that the execution of civic education in Hong Kong schools has not achieved its desired success [1, 2]. An in-depth analysis of the current state of civic education reveals a curriculum that is overwhelmingly dominated by the presentation of concepts and questions, as opposed to a comprehensive exploration of them [3]. Furthermore, the conservative predisposition and restricted scope of the content hinder the realization of the objectives of civic education.

Rectifying these inadequacies necessitates confronting considerable challenges, which are deeply rooted in the broader contexts of national politics, local governance, and curriculum redesign. Despite these challenges, researchers have posited that incorporating students in school governance can foster the development of their future civic skills [4]. This approach not only significantly mitigates the costs that impede the operational implementation of civic education but also provides multifaceted benefits.

Involvement in school governance promotes the development of essential civic skills such as expression, negotiation, reciprocity, and inclusivity [5]. On a broader scale, it equips students with the necessary skills to think critically and act decisively in an increasingly polarized political climate.

2. Background

2.1. World Trends towards Student Voice in School Governance

2.1.1. A Necessity for a Fully Functioning Society

The other work has been made that there will be no room for passive citizens in the future [6]. In similar fashion, the argument has been advanced that civic participation cannot be an optional endeavor in the forthcoming decade, but rather a prerequisite for a fully functioning society. In other

words, the promotion of active citizenship and the augmentation of civic involvement stand as pivotal trends on the contemporary agenda.

In a departure from viewing children as 'citizens in waiting', Osier and Starkey propose that schoolchildren are now regarded as 'citizens in their own right' [7]. This shift toward a more robust civic involvement is reflective of a larger trend, suggesting that schools should be more receptive to facilitating civic participation among students. The public is anticipated to support this growing trend of school democratization, as Yuan posits a concurrent trend towards engaging various stakeholders, including students, in school decision-making processes [8].

Moreover, the importance of heeding students' perspectives has been highlighted as an emerging and critical educational mandate of our era [9].

2.1.2. A Claimed Right

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) articulates in Articles 12 and 15 that children possess the right and freedom to express opinions on matters that impact them, thus acknowledging their rights and responsibilities [10, 11].

This underscores the contemporary emphasis on safeguarding students' voices. Consequently, accommodating student perspectives on decisions related to school governance is not merely a prevailing trend, but is anticipated to be an essential practice in the future pursuant to Article 12. In the wake of the UNCRC, the concept of "student voice" has been gaining momentum for several decades.

2.2. Current Status of Student Participation in School Governance in Hong Kong

Students are often not encouraged to critically assess rules, but rather, are expected to comply. Studies have shown that students in the United States are generally expected to adopt a passive and uncritical attitude towards school rules [12], a tendency also observed in numerous schools across Hong Kong [4].

In terms of attitudes towards student participation, Tse posits that schools in Hong Kong typically exhibit conservative, authoritarian, and paternalistic tendencies, with a general lack of encouragement for student participation in school governance [2]. Regarding participation initiatives, Lister argues that if the "participation mechanism" fails to foster meaningful action, the act of participation may devolve into a superficial exercise or, at its best, a tokenistic gesture [13].

Regrettably, research concerning the autonomy and genuine participation of Student Unions, specifically within an Asian context, is notably sparse [14]. Nonetheless, some researchers highlight that Student Unions in Hong Kong schools are primarily involved in relatively minor operational matters. Consequently, student participation in school governance is often dismissed as bordering on tokenism [2, 14].

3. Improvements that Schools Can Make

Addressing the theme of 'amplifying student voice in schools', Cook-Sather posits that schools are confronted with a dual challenge: to modify the ingrained structures within our educational mindset that create resistance towards eliciting and acknowledging student voices, and to alter the structures in educational relationships and institutions that both uphold and are reinforced by this reluctance [15]. This is no easy undertaking, with numerous scholars dubbing it an 'impossible task'.

In a similar vein, Cook-Sather proposes potential pathways for 'change': ensuring that students are accorded legitimate and valued platforms to articulate their views, in conjunction with adjusting our educational perception to be more receptive to student voices. The former is further broken down into four key points.

3.1. Ensuring Spaces

3.1.1. The System and Rules

A greater liberalization of rules is advocated so as to create more avenues for student recommendations and ideas. This flexibility in rule-setting is perceived as creating opportunities for ongoing consultation and adjustment [4]. Additionally, a systematic approach to student participation needs to be instituted to ensure that as the student population grows, student voices are incorporated into the decision-making process.

3.1.2. The Establishment of Student Councils

Trafford posits that student councils stand as exemplary embodiments of school empowerment, providing schools with a valuable opportunity to hear their students and offer them a platform for expression [16]. This approach, as Wyness observes, is often utilized [17]. From the vantage point of the students, Alderson found that student councils can bolster children's comprehension and eagerness to learn [18]. It is further proposed that this method is particularly applicable to schools with larger student populations.

3.1.3. Open More Direct Access

Procedures to amend perceived inequitable rules and contest unfair treatment are seldom present and, when they do exist, they frequently encounter a multitude of hierarchical and authoritarian obstacles inherent to school governance. Hypothetically, the aforementioned barriers may be more responsive to collective commentary from the student council. Consequently, the school could consider implementing more direct and individualized feedback processes, such as anonymously addressing letters to individuals and departments expressing dissent, or positioning suggestion boxes directly outside each management office. Such approaches would likely diminish barriers and establish a conduit for students to freely articulate their suggestions.

3.2. Realigning Ears

Scholars in this domain emphasize the need for school administrators to cultivate a team with shared values. Through a case study by Yuen and Leung, it was discovered that the headmaster's robust belief in student participation and empowerment served as a crucial catalyst for facilitating student involvement in school governance [4]. Similarly, Trafford argues that the process of school democratization demands considerable effort from school administrators, particularly principals [16]. Therefore, democracy training is not exclusive to new teachers; Smit and Oostuizen propose that all school stakeholders involved in education should commence providing democracy training [19]. Researchers posit that such training and education embed the fundamental knowledge, values, and attitudes requisite for substantive democracy.

4. Discussion

In a case study conducted by scholars, students in Hong Kong exhibited a negative demeanor towards public examinations, primarily due to the enhanced pressure diminishing their enthusiasm and involvement in school governance [4]. Additionally, interview transcripts revealed that skills acquired from participating in school governance were not recognized in public examinations, discouraging some students. To address these issues, the Hong Kong Assessment could incorporate a broader range of topics. Could certain elements of the Basic Competency Assessment (BCA) be replaced with evaluations of school participation and students' civic skills, without augmenting the initial assessment load on students? Currently, many schools organize unproductive drilling exercises due to concerns over students failing the BCA, leading to adverse impacts on both students and schools [20]. This contradicts the BCA's original intention of enhancing curriculum, teaching, and learning in schools. Including student participation as an assessment element also aligns with the

expectation that 'civic engagement is essential for the future', promotes school democratization, and enhances various aspects of students and schools, thereby aligning with their foundational purpose.

Moreover, given its low-stakes nature, the BCA does not impose excessive stress on students. Simultaneously, it serves as a test component that encourages students to actively engage in school governance and compels schools to amplify student voices. This approach somewhat resolves the aforementioned issues and reverses the trend of only involving students in minor matters.

5. Conclusion

Despite the global shift towards incorporating student voices into school decision-making, some scholars have noted a significant proportion of students expressing dissatisfaction with their schools. In the context of Hong Kong, student councils appear to be a comparatively effective and unique conduit for articulating student perspectives. However, issues persist, including the limited remit of student councils to handling minor matters, and their exclusion from significant decision-making processes. There is an imminent requirement for schools to enhance their efforts in both areas. Schools are confronted with a dual challenge to empower students to voice their opinions, yet overcoming these hurdles is essential. From a student perspective, this is crucial for their civic education and personal empowerment. For schools, it is fundamental to fostering a positive learning environment and nurturing relationships with students. Fortunately, successful examples have demonstrated that aspirations are attainable when principals, administrators, teachers, and students collaborate towards a unified objective. Nonetheless, there remains a considerable journey towards achieving genuine student involvement in school governance, transcending mere tokenistic participation.

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