

## **Does the School Curriculum Harm our Children and Deny Social Justice?**

Nothing saddens me more than hearing the news that some young people or children have committed suicide because of the stress of examinations: some have killed themselves before the examinations and others after hearing the examination results. One was only seven years old when he jumped off a building after he failed his spelling test. We as adults know that failing a spelling test was trivial, but the child, who faced tremendous pressure and expectations, chose to end his life because of shame and inability to perceive a future with a failed test. While support is needed for children with suicidal thoughts, our education system needs to be reconsidered in order to become a system for the best interests of our children.

School curriculum has had been in many ways harmful to our children. First of all, we set an expectation and standards for them to achieve without exception. However as we know, all children learn at different speeds, just like we adults do. This has resulted in forcing children to comply with arbitrary standards for their progress instead of allowing them to develop naturally. This would introduce stress to children because more effort is needed than if the children learnt on their own. Stress would in turn harm the development of brain neurons, which causes excess anxiety response and other adverse effects on children. In a situation where some children advance more quickly than their peers, they will feel bored at the rate of their progress and attempt to distract themselves with something more exciting, or in other words, may become delinquent.

Furthermore, the school curriculum only offers privileged knowledge-based subjects, but not practical skills such as carpentry, dance and make-up skills. Some children are particularly talented in this area but the chances are that they would be directed to 'proper studies' since this is the mainstream trend. This was almost the case for a choreographer who was too hyperactive to sit down and learn quietly when she was young. So, teachers directed her to a psychiatrist. Instead of diagnosing her with ADHD, the psychiatrist directed her to be a dancer. Therefore we have a famous musical called 'Cats'.

In the discussion above, social justice would not be achieved if we do not recognise and develop some children's exceptional talents and personality. On another level, the school curriculum benefits those parents with a better economic background rather than the disadvantaged. This is because children's progress in the school curriculum can be enhanced by attending tuition centres or receiving better education in alternative schools and these services are fee paying.

Perhaps I have always looked for a better model of an education system, for I am always impressed by the Finnish education system where teachers all have a Master degree and only top students are selected for teacher training. This is complemented by the education system being designed for social democracy. As a result, teachers are able to make professional judgement on student's progress and do justice to the student's development. For them, students cannot simply be categorised in terms of the assessments. Cooperative learning is encouraged among peers instead of competition in achieving better examination results.

It is an irony that other countries compete for a higher ranking in international student assessments, while the Finns who remove themselves from the competition and keep serving their children as their educational aim, remain in top position in the educational system league table. Recently, they reformed their education system by replacing subjects with topics. I can see their rationale for it as they are trying to recreate real life learning experience and collaborative work among students. This is complementary to the fact that Finnish students have shorter school hours so that students have enough time to explore the world themselves. With the progress of Finnish education, I hope that, one day, they will lead world movement in removing the school curriculum for the best interest of the child.

For more information on how schools harm children's rights, please refer to *Schooling as Violence* by Clive Harber.

Related TED talk: [http://www.ted.com/talks/ken\\_robinson\\_says\\_schools\\_kill\\_creativity](http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity)

Related news on Finnish education: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/finland-schools-subjects-are-out-and-topics-are-in-as-country-reforms-its-education-system-10123911.html> and <https://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storycode=6080527>

Miss Heather Phoon graduated from the University of Hong Kong with a First Class honour in Bachelor of Science, major in Food and Nutritional Science. She has completed her postgraduate study with Faculty of Education, the University of Glasgow and focused her Master of Philosophy (MPhil) thesis on implementing children's rights in Scottish school settings. She is currently working with Malaysian Child Resource Institute (MCRI). She has a particular deep interest in democratic schools and alternative education.

E-mail: [phoon\\_yong\\_shian@hotmail.com](mailto:phoon_yong_shian@hotmail.com)