

Improving School Culture by Introducing Children's Rights into Practices

During my stay in Scotland last year, I interviewed secondary school teachers regarding their experience in teaching and practising children's rights, the United Nation Convention of Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in their schools. Generally, their opinions are very positive since there were numerous progressive changes in the school culture, while one of them commented, 'this is the best thing I have ever done'. These transformational changes were inspired by UNICEF UK who initiated Rights-respecting School Award (RRSA), which aimed to improve the children's rights status, in the school, for the community and around the world.

The award requires extensive commitment from the whole school level and the teachers had to make efforts to gain support from their colleagues. This is because some teachers resisted such initiative since there were misunderstandings of the nature of UNCRC as empowering children to become unruly and demanding based on the rights they were taught. However, the opposite is true: the students were more disciplined and compassionate. This has brought many teachers from scepticism to pleasant surprise.

The magic is this: students were taught to respect peers' rights while they were having their rights met. Whenever there was misbehaviour, students were told that they were being disruptive to the class and being disrespectful towards others' rights to education. Other than that, the students were reported to be more respectful towards the teachers because teachers were willing to listen. Communications were open and both parties were more ready to understand each other's situations to tackle the problems of disruptive behaviour by figuring out the solutions together.

Of course, the students demanded improvements of their schools such as lockers and cleaner toilets. These had actually made the school to become a more pleasant place to be for the students to focus on their studies comfortably. Interestingly, there was one example where teachers were requested to behave in class as not to show favouritism, shout or drink coffee during the lesson. Other than that, punishment exercise was decreased and replaced with demerit system. The result was, decreased detention and exclusion.

The students' demands were made through student representatives meetings or pupil voice box met with funding available from the local council. This enhanced students' confidence, leadership quality and problem-solving skills as these were required to hold

meetings and whole-school surveys. Compassionate hearts were cultured too as students were encouraged to organise charity events for fundraising and increasing the awareness of social issues, at the community level as well as global issues.

In conclusion, the teachers in the interview found that their school had changed to a better place since they implemented children's rights into their teaching practices. Students and teachers had learned to respect others' rights and assert their rights to protect everyone's interest. To me, it is a many wins situation where students and teachers were empowered: an improvement in students' confidence, compassion, soft skills and behaviour as well as teachers' teaching practices. Since understanding the many powerful and convincing benefits of implementing children's rights in schools, I have been dreaming of the day that our young generations are becoming respectful citizens for the greater good of humanity, starting by learning and practising children's rights in schools...

By HEATHER PHOON

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