Liberalizing Liberal Studies in Pre-University Education in Hong Kong: Leadership Development and Beyond

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In preparing to meet the challenges resulting from the forthcoming changes in Hong Kong from a seven-year pre-university and three-year university academic structure to one that prescribes a three-year junior secondary, three-year senior secondary and four-year university education, parallel changes have been suggested in the senior secondary curriculum. Particularly worthy of note is the introduction of Liberal Studies as a core subject required for admission to university education. While Liberal Studies has been hailed as a subject that could teach our students what is missing and desperately needed in the current system, transforming them into lifelong learners who have critical thinking skills with multiple perspectives, the elusive identity of Liberal Studies has inevitably generated controversies. It is suggested that interdisciplinary areas such as human evolution or human conditions studied from an evolutionary perspective are in line with the aims of Liberal Studies. And success experiences in conducting leadership training and development programs that embody

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desirable qualities and skills prized in Liberal Studies could provide invaluable lessons for educators in the process of developing curriculum for Liberal Studies.

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The more recent proposed reform on the academic structure in secondary and university education in Hong Kong is perhaps not novel, but has been a topic under discussion for many years. The notion that a student needs to go through three years of junior secondary and three years of senior secondary studies for preparation to enter a normative four-year university program is generally accepted as a better alternative to the current system (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). The current academic system of three years of junior secondary, two years of senior secondary, two years of matriculation studies before entering a normative three-year university program has perhaps served us well in the past in the selection of highly able students to enter university through two public examinations when a small percentage, possibly less than 5%, of the high school graduates were allowed to pursue university education as compared with the current 18% of students who will pursue university education in Hong Kong. The major shortcomings of the current system are many. They include, among others, the unnecessary lengthening of pre-university education for capable youngsters, the crowding of the pre-university education curricula with many disciplinary subjects, the spending of a great amount of time in preparing and coaching students for public examinations on these prescribed subjects rather than spending the time to address important concerns such as the teaching of critical thinking and the nurturing of creativity, and the misguided emphasis of many students and possibly schools on learning for performance in examination rather than putting the emphasis on learning for understanding. Admittedly, there are also many more complex issues involved in the maintenance of the current system. These issues could be non-educational or non-academic ones, such as the allocation of public financial resources to secondary and

university education, and the regulation of restricted university admission to specialized training based on projection of required human resources in future job markets in non-specialist and specialist sectors through differential public funding. On the other hand, the proposed reform on the academic structure in secondary education articulated with a four-year university education has far reaching consequences, the more obvious and immediate of which is the need to rethink and redesign the secondary curriculum and the corresponding public examinations.

The Elusive Identity of Liberal Studies

In line with the reform in academic structure, corresponding proposed changes in curriculum in senior secondary studies are intended to streamline the core subjects required to be taken by all students, reduce the number of elective subjects, and to make time and space for other learning experiences such as moral and civic education, community service, esthetic and physical activities, and career-related experiences (see Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). Particularly worthy of note in the core subjects in the revised curriculum is the introduction of Liberal Studies as a disciplinary subject to be taught in senior secondary years. While Liberal Studies is not a new subject in Hong Kong, the mandatory inclusion of Liberal Studies as a core subject to be examined for admission to university is perhaps novel. However, Liberal Studies as a disciplinary or interdisciplinary subject is not well defined, and there is no consensus view that commands wide acceptance among educators in Hong Kong. At this proposal stage, the content of Liberal Studies is guided broadly by its aims to expand students' knowledge base and enhance their social awareness through the study of a diversity of contemporary issues, by the approach that is inquiry-based to help students connect knowledge from different disciplines as well as adopt a multidisciplinary perspectives and critical thinking on issues, and by the narrower outcome of a better understanding of the society of Hong Kong, the development of China, globalization, and citizenship at the community,

national, and international levels (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). Further, three areas of study are suggested, each with its own sub-areas or units. They are: (1) "self and personal development," encompassing "understanding oneself" and "interpersonal relationship"; (2) "society and culture," encompassing "life in Hong Kong under one-country-two-systems," "development of modern China," "globalization in a diversified world," and "Chinese cultural heritages in the modern world"; and (3) "science, technology and the environment," encompassing "diseases and public health," "information technology and society," and "pollution and the environment" (see Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). Apart from these three areas and nine compulsory units, there are also twelve suggested elective units.

While these three areas and twenty-one units are admirably comprehensive, there is always a danger that educators, curriculum design-ers and subject experts could be tempted with good intentions to repackage important but defunct content areas back into these broad areas and units, despite the admonition that these units should not be treated as independent fields of knowledge but as platforms for the inquiry of issues. On the other hand, while students are encouraged to apply the perspectives they learn in one area to the study of other areas, one might raise the question whether issues associated with or arising from one specific area could be usefully studied without privileging the perspective of that specific area. Perhaps, rather than adhering rigidly to the study of these "disciplinary" areas, one should start looking for more "interdisciplinary" areas of which different domain-specific knowledge and multiple perspectives could be brought to bear on the study.

From Human Evolution to Leadership Development

Evidently, there are many possible choices for selection. One area that readily comes to mind is human evolution, which has issues that crosscut many disciplines and could be studied from many different perspectives

(see Gardner, 1999). Some obvious issues are associated with biological inheritance, eugenics, human genome project, artificial insemination, hereditary diseases, societal norms, cultural rituals and myths. And there are many more issues with futuristic orientations such as human cloning, robotics and bionics, and aerospace aviation and travel. Alternatively, different aspects of human behaviors could be studied and connected through the evolutionary perspective (see Buss, 2003; Crawford & Salmon, 2004). The comprehensive coverage on the human conditions is indeed overwhelmingly compelling. Thus, through the inquiries into human evolution, students could expand their knowledge base and enhance their awareness of scientific, social, and ethical issues. Students could also learn to adopt a multidisciplinary perspective in their examination and critical evaluation of these issues that cut across domains of self and personal development, society and culture, and science, technology and environment. Viewed in this manner, studies on human evolution could be an interdisciplinary topic well suited to be included as a part of the curriculum for Liberal Studies.

More importantly, human evolution as an example of an interdisciplinary content area not only deserves to be studied in itself, it could also provide the appropriate knowledge context for the training of students' critical thinking and decision making on specific issues. In this connection, it is noteworthy to consider leadership training or leadership development programs, which have for long recognized these skills as crucial for effective leadership, and have included the nurturing of these skills in the leadership development or leadership training curriculum.

Throughout human history and in societies all over the world, there has always been an abiding interest in developing leaders (see Ayman, 2000). While leadership development programs are widespread nowadays (Day, 2000), the attention has often been largely focused on the continued development of leadership skills and abilities for adults, such as managers, administrators, and officials, who are already in positions of leadership (see Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). In recent years, there has been a gradual shift of attention in leadership development to younger individuals who are

identified as potential leaders (e.g., Schneider, Ehrhart, & Ehrhart, 2002; Schneider, Paul, White, & Holcombe, 1999). In gifted education, leadership training and development are however not novel for gifted students, as gifted students are often considered to be society's future leaders (see Davis & Rimm, 2004; Richardson & Feldhusen, 1988; Sisk, 1993).

Under different disciplines, leadership development has been studied throughout human history, dating back to the time of the ancient Greece when Plato discussed the development of philosopher-kings. The ancient Chinese text *I Ching* or *The Book of Changes* is said to be a book for emperors and leaders (see Mun, 2000). Leadership development has also been studied as an applied discipline, with a set of knowledge and skills to be applied to leading groups and organizations effectively. In this connection, it is of great interest that different educators and researchers have associated different skills, competencies, and intelligences with effective leadership (e.g., Gardner, 1995, 1997; Goleman, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Karnes & Chauvin, 1985; Lefton & Buzzotta, 2004; Oakland, Falkenberg, & Oakland, 1996; Philips, 1992; Richardson & Feldhusen, 1988; Roach et al., 1999; Sternberg, 2002). There are also different approaches that emphasize the personal aspect, the relationship aspect, and the visionary goal and change aspect of leadership (see Barker, 1997; Daft, 2005). Nonetheless, it is understood that leadership cannot be viewed simply as traits or behaviors, but is a highly contextual construct that emerges through a complex interaction of leaders, followers, and situations (Fiedler, 1996). And despite the different emphases in different approaches, the knowledge and skills in ethical decision-making, critical thinking, interpersonal interactions, and group dynamics and functioning are all believed to be important for successful leadership. The nurturing of these skills is precisely what is to be achieved in the curriculum of Liberal Studies.

Leadership Development Curriculum

It is generally acknowledged that the leadership development curriculum

should present important concepts, theories and applications of leadership, and the content should be well grounded in leadership research (see Davis & Rimm, 2004; Richardson & Feldhusen, 1988; Roets, 1997; Sisk, 1993). Consequently, a multidisciplinary approach to leadership development is often adopted because it not only provides curricular "breadth" but also is consistent with the evidence in cognitive psychology that learning is enhanced by the presentation of a particular construct from multiple perspectives and contexts (see Woolfolk, 2004). On the other hand, the development and training of leadership skills, including creative thinking skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal and communication skills, public speaking skills, skills in group dynamics, and negotiation and mediation skills, is always a focus of the curriculum, producing students who possess knowledge of leadership, but who also have enhanced their personal leadership capacity. It is important that there is a balance of classroom-based instruction and structured opportunities such as simulated leadership experiences, internships and service learning experiences to apply theories and concepts learned in the classroom. It is equally important to integrate classroom-based learning and the experiential work by relating the experiences back to the classroom materials (see Des Marais, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000). In developing and planning leadership development curriculum for youths, educators could also benefit from consulting exemplary programs and curricula developed to enhance leadership giftedness in gifted and talented students (see Richardson & Feldhusen, 1988; Roets, 1997; Sisk, 1993).

In recent years, there are renewed interests in gifted education in associating leadership development with character and values education (see Davis & Rimm, 2004; Renzulli, 2003), which suggest that leadership giftedness could be broadened and enriched by incorporating, in addition to leadership competencies and skills, qualities such as caring, commitment to serve, and sensitivity to human concerns. Indeed, Renzulli (2003) suggests that leadership is a necessary condition for the creation of social capital, which is a set of intangible assets that address the collective needs and problems of other individuals and the communities at large.

Thus, in combining classroom-based learning with opportunities to apply leadership concepts to actual or simulated learning experiences, service learning in leadership development programs can also help teach students social responsibility and increase their multicultural awareness, instilling in students the value of service to the larger community and enhancing their critical thinking skills through studying ethics (see Des Marais, Yang, & Farzanehkia, 2000). Global awareness, critically important in our increasingly internationalized world, will also be enhanced especially when opportunities of service learning and internships are offered in other societies or countries.

Leadership Development for Youths in Hong Kong

Just like societies in many parts of the world, the Hong Kong community has always been keen on the training and development of business as well as political leaders to maintain its continuous success and vitality in business and finance, (see Cheng, 1997; Smith & Wang, 1996). Consequently, a large number of leadership training or development programs have been developed over the years for university students, business executives, school principals, and government officials. In contrast, similar programs for school children and adolescents have been few and relatively underrepresented, at least until in recent years. Perhaps the increasing number of leadership development programs for youths is largely a response to the fourth report of the Hong Kong Education Commission (1990), which included leadership as an aspect of giftedness to be targeted for development in gifted students (Hong Kong Education Department, 2000). Indeed, from a broader perspective, the notion that leadership development programs are for all students, including gifted and talented students, is in line with the perspective that all students need to know the rudiments of leadership and should be encouraged to develop their leadership potential (Richardson & Feldhusen, 1988; Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991). From a slightly different perspective, if the aim of leadership development programs is to reach students who would not otherwise consider themselves to be leaders or potential

leaders and to provide access to students who might not have the opportunity or the inclination to study leadership, leadership development could rightly be included as an important part of the Liberal Studies curriculum.

Leadership development programs however are not novel to the Hong Kong secondary curriculum. Very often, leadership development programs as part of extracurricular programs have their focus on developing individual student's leadership potential via imparting knowledge, skills, abilities, and values. Typically, the emphasis is on preparing students for future leadership positions, or simply increasing their knowledge, skills, and understanding of leadership, and practicum, internship or service learning are generally not made part of the leadership development programs. While these programs might be school-based and are designed and developed to meet the needs of the student populations of particular schools, there are also other programs organized not by the schools themselves but by voluntary agencies doing youth work. A notable one conducting leadership training for students from different schools is the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups.

Exemplary University-Based Leadership Development Programs in Hong Kong

While universities around the world, including Hong Kong, generally have leadership training or development programs for undergraduates, and many North American universities even have undergraduate programs offering academic credit in the form of bachelor's degree or academic minor (see Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003), there are relatively few leadership programs offered to high school students by institutes of higher education. The exceptions are university-based leadership programs offered to high school gifted students. For example, the Programs for the Gifted and Talented at The Chinese University of Hong Kong has provided a number of leadership development programs for high school students with potentials in leadership giftedness since 1998. These leadership development programs have

subscribed to slightly different curricula that emphasize creative thinking (e.g., Creative Leadership Training Program), creativity and outdoor activities (e.g., Creative Adventure-Based Leadership Training Program), and practical and tacit knowledge of leadership through school service learning (e.g., Successful Leadership Development Program). The leadership development curricula of some of these programs have been described in greater details elsewhere (see Chan, 2000a), and the evaluation of their effectiveness has been found to be by and large favorable and beneficial (see Chan, 2003).

Capitalizing on the success experiences in conducting leadership training and development programs for gifted students, and in response to the needs of schools for student leadership from the student population (see Chan, 2000b), The Chinese University of Hong Kong under the Centre for University and School Partnership has recently designed a student leadership program that grounds leadership development on building competence and character and on the notion of whole-person development (see Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi, & Damon, 2001). Funded by the Quality Education Fund, the project aims to benefit all students in a school through their learning of the rudiments of leadership using specifically designed learning packages targeted as curriculum materials in key learning areas for primary and secondary students. Specifically, the design of the curriculum materials as resources of a general nature is guided by the four building blocks of leadership, namely, creativity, critical thinking, caring, and commitment (4Cs). Alternatively, it could be conceptualized that the rudiments of leadership, that is, the 4Cs, are nurtured in selected key learning areas such as Personal, Social and Humanities Education, Physical Education, and English/Chinese Language Education, to be incorporated into the schools' formal curriculum with flexible necessary adaptations to meet the needs of specific student populations. While the learning packages have not been designed and developed as Liberal Studies curriculum in mind, the equivalence is all too evident.

Leadership Development and Beyond

Since it is made known that Liberal Studies will become a core subject required for admission to university education as a part of the changes in academic structure in Hong Kong, there is a burgeoning interest and even keen competition among teacher education providers to develop Liberal Studies curriculum and programs to prepare pre-service and in-service teachers to teach the subject. Liberal Studies has also been promoted by the government as a subject that could teach our students what is missing and desperately needed in the current system, transforming them into lifelong learners who have critical thinking skills and multiple perspectives. While it should be noted that Liberal Studies is not a panacea for the problems in our current school system that has overemphasized grades and achievement, overvalued drilling and rote learning, and underdeveloped creativity and critical thinking in our students, Liberal Studies does have a unifying role in helping our students focus on topics and issues for studies from multidisciplinary approaches of inquiries. Thus, Liberal Studies will have different faces, and the possible choices of interdisciplinary content areas to be studied could be infinite. Human evolution or evolutionary psychology in studying human conditions has been suggested as one promising area, and leadership development as another. No doubt, there are many more interdisciplinary areas that cut across domains of self and personal development, society and culture, and science, technology and environment. In particular, leadership training and development for youths has existed for perhaps over a decade or even more in our secondary education but has not been included as a part of the formal curriculum. Leadership development not only provides the opportunities and contexts to impart on students the desirable qualities attributed to Liberal Studies but also the futuristic orientation and a commitment to serve humanity. It is timely that we build on the success experiences in conducting leadership training and development programs, and seek to include leadership development as a part of our Liberal Studies curriculum. The great tasks that lie ahead are for our

educational researchers to evaluate whether leadership development pro-
grams could serve to achieve the aims of our Liberal Studies curriculum,
and to ensure that teachers and practitioners are well informed of the results
of evaluation studies.

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