

Our Education: How do we tackle the root of problems?

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Hong Kong is not short of investment in education with public expenditure around HK\$79 billion during the year 2015 to 16 constituting around 3.3 % of GDP and 18.5% of government expenditure.¹ There are also many other resources available for education development such as Quality Education Fund. However we still face crisis in education as reflected by emotional disturbance of students and teachers as well as parents. Study by Centre for Health Education and Health Promotion of CUHK has reported the pattern of emotional health of students over years among 1,204 Primary four (P4) and 678 secondary three (S3) students of 17 primary schools and 5 secondary schools when they first joined the Quality Education Fund Healthy School network in 2010 until 2013 (P 4 and S3 students were chosen to examine the changes for consistency and understanding the cumulative impact of Healthy School at this mid-point of schooling).² . K6 scale is being used to assess emotional disturbance.³ The proportion of students with scores above 13 dropped from 23% to 10% among primary students and from 24.9% to 17.6% among secondary schools. The self-harm behaviours also dropped with around 15% of students in 2010 to around 10% in 2013. The findings highlight the significance of healthy school environment allowing students to enjoy school life. Is our current education system creating a healthy school environment with excess demand on teachers on many activities compromising their time in teaching development and interaction with students? Are we creating a school environment to encourage communication and development of inter-personal relationship or driving our students to become more self-centered obsessed with their own performance in short term rather than enhancement of their basic life skills for long term future?

One would put the blame on high level of competitiveness of our contemporary society. It is true that the level of competition during my student time in 60s and 70s was nowhere like the current level. However gaining entry to higher education especially the two universities at that time was almost a dream. Even though I studied in one of the elite secondary schools in Hong Kong, only around one third would gain entry to universities (including overseas) at that time but almost 100% now. Over half of my classmates had to start working and studying part-time. However many of my classmates without degree managed to build up a reasonable career reaching at least level of social needs or even esteem needs of '*Maslow Hierarchy of Needs*'. Why so many students felt left out nowadays especially if they would not advance to higher education?

The so called '*knowledge based*' economy has marginalized many young people who have the potentials in vocational training but they might not be able to find jobs. Many jobs requiring technical skills, '*blue collars*' have shifted out of Hong Kong to mainland China and other Asian countries. Although there are opportunities for '*so-called*' services industry, they are not the types of jobs for students with attributes as '*blue collar*'. Even for the '*white collar*' jobs, the market has shrined mainly for those with very advanced qualifications. The current phenomenon is that many university graduates are competing for clerical positions, which in the past was mainly for school leavers. That might well explain why the popularity for sub-degree programmes operated by non-UGC institutions is waning. How would our students enjoy school life if they are faced with limited opportunities in future? Who should be blamed for driving students to aim for high academic achievement scarifying the opportunities for whole person development? Teachers and parents should not be blamed as they are also the victims. They become very stressful and fully occupied with future of their students/children leaving very little quality time for sharing and frank exchange. Will you be surprised why students and teachers also parents suffer from great stress?

Expansion of degree programmes is not panacea for the problem unless it is developed with more appropriate jobs for graduates. It would be even more dangerous if the market is flooded with graduates and we are beginning to observe the phenomenon with more students pursuing degree programmes overseas then return. We need to explore service industry using technical skills as some students learn better through practical training rather than academic training. With manufacturing industries moving out, what other services will have high demand for our contemporary society? Health care industry is one with greatest needs. However the situation in our current health system is predominately institutional basis with medical and health professionals playing dominating role, and health care workers at lower level perform very tedious and routine jobs with very little intellectual inputs. The complexity of hospitals makes it almost impossible for workers without high level of training to play a significant role? However have we explored the health care industry in community setting? Would health care workers without conventional training in medicine, nursing and allied health play a bigger role in community setting?

The health care services in community setting would go beyond disease management and also cover wellness and promoting better health. The '*wellness*' industry will have room for health care workers to develop not only it is less complex from medical

and health perspectives, it represents different state of art which young people would make it more glorifying. Active health promotion is primary prevention by reducing people exposing to risk factors and enhancement of protective factors. This requires different set of skills from management of people with acute illnesses. Student would consider vocational training in the field and serve in community setting. Not only this would reduce admission to hospitals with better care in community, it also enables the young health care worker to play a more leading role.

One of the key issues to be tackled to improve education in Hong Kong is career opportunity. We need to develop vocational education for high school students not just to award them qualification, but to prepare them for new types of ‘service industry’ such as health and social care. We need to de-institutionalize appropriate health and social care services allowing the youngsters with basic vocational training able to take some leading role. This will not only create jobs for them but also boost up their self-esteem and life satisfaction. Education policy cannot be developed in silo without observing the manpower needs and demands in our society helping our students to opt in rather than opt out.

1. <http://www.edb.gov.hk/en/about-edb/publications-stat/figures/gov-expenditure.html>
2. Lee A., Keung V., Lo A., Kwong A. Healthy School environment to tackle youth mental health crisis. *Letter to Editor. Hong Kong Journal of Paediatric* 2016; 21 (2): 134-5.
3. Kessler, R.C., Green, J.G., Gruber, M.J., et al. Screening for serious mental illness in the general population with the K6 screening scale: results from the WHO World Mental Health (WMH) survey initiative. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research* 2010; 19(Supplement 1), 4–22. doi: 10.1002/mpr.310