

PROMOTING CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION THROUGH DIFFERENT TEACHING METHODS

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Abstract

Since Vietnam - the first country in Asia and the second one in the world – ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, a number of decrees and decisions have been put forth and many programs and projects have been organized to realize the children's rights for the best interests of children. In recent years, the Primary Education Sector has organized training sessions, network meetings among schools and localities for the purpose of training and supporting teachers in teaching methodology and extracurricular-activity organizing methods aiming at enhancing students' learning autonomy and confidence. In fact, achievements in applying the Rights to Survival, Rights to Protection and Rights to Development have been clearly realized. However, there remain difficulties in how to effectively implement the Rights to Participation. The paper provides the general context of teaching and learning at primary schools in Ho Chi Minh City, with a focus on Children Rights to Participation, particularly the right to express their own opinions and suggests ways to implement the Rights to Participation in various educational activities so as to help them promote learning autonomy and confidence in showing their ideas.

Key words: Rights to Participation, rights to express opinions, learning autonomy.

INTRODUCTION

Since Vietnam - the first country in Asia and the second one in the world – ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, a number of legal documents, decrees and decisions have been put forth and many programs and projects have been organized to realize the children's rights. To be more specific, Vietnam has signed World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children in the 1990s (1990), approved Law on Child Protection, Care and Education (1991), ratified four Conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) Concerning Child Labor (1994), given instructions on Enhancing the Protection, Care and Education of Children (1998), developed National Action Programme for Children 2001-2020 (2000); gone through the Declaration of commitments for children in ASEAN countries (2001), etc (Save the Children, 2007, p. 269).

In Vietnam, Child Rights are categorized into four groups: Rights to Survival, Rights to Protection, Rights to Development and Rights to Participation. Primary school students begin to access their rights both in theory and in real life practice since first grade (DOET, 1999; Mai Anh, 2003; Pham, 2014).



Figure 1. Child Rights in Vietnam

In recent years, the Primary Education Sector has organized training sessions, network meetings among schools and localities for the purpose of training and supporting teachers in teaching methodology and extra-activity organizing methods aiming at enhancing students' learning autonomy and confidence. In fact, achievements in applying Rights to Survival, Rights to Protection and Rights to Development have been clearly realized. However, there remain difficulties in how to effectively implement the Rights to Participation. Those training sessions and network meetings have, in some respect, improved teaching methods and the organization of extracurricular activities. The students' interests and concerns have been taken much more into consideration, resulting in lessons and outdoor activities. In addition, Circular 30 on the Assessment of Primary School Children (MOET, 2014) has given students the opportunity to express their opinions on their own learning process and academic results as well as their peers', helping students become more autonomous and active in their school work and in social life. Besides, the Project on Full Education Innovation, which is underway, also pays great attention to the formation of the Rights to Participation of students. However, students' proactive and confident participation is considerably low. Still, they do not actively seek for their own problems or suggest ways to solve the problems but rely on the teacher's guidance. That is the reason why there exists a real need to enhance Rights to Participation for the best interests of children.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Rights to Participation and Rights to Express Opinions.

The participation of a child can be understood as having rights to access information, to express opinions, to be heard, to be respected, to establish or join groups and associations, to discuss and decide all matters related to the child himself or herself (Save the Children, 2007, p. 186). This is clearly cited in Article 12, 13, 15 and 17 of

CRC.

Every child is under the care and influence of their family and society. Children have their own thoughts and feelings, so they should not be regarded as those passively affected by other people but those taking the initiative in expressing their own ideas, doing things that positively affect them and the community around them. Given this recognition, they also contribute to the society as this is not only the right but also the duty of every person in the society.

Theoretically, elementary school students gain access to Rights to Participation mainly through Theme 4: *School, where children learn and play*, and Theme 5: *My point of view is important, too* (DOET, 1999). Not only does theme 4 help students realize that they have the right to be nurtured and to develop but also make them aware of their rights and responsibilities in building up a friendly learning environment. To fulfill their rights and responsibilities, students are encouraged to show their thoughts, views, initiatives; and engage in activities to realize those thoughts, views, initiatives as well. Theme 5 focuses on Rights to Participation, helping students become aware that they have the right to express their ideas on all issues in life and those ideas are respected, recognized and carried out with careful consideration.

Practically, students are doing their Rights to Participation in the process of learning and extracurricular activities. To be precise; during school hours, students, with the guidance of teachers, are involved in the construction of the lesson and jointly create their own learning outcomes. Students are encouraged to show their opinions and debate in small groups, large groups and whole classes (Save the Children, 2004; SIDA & Lund University, 2010). The designed learning content is suited to students' life to help them become aware of and be able to think and give ideas about it. Besides, in the last two years, the Primary Education Sector has required teachers to shape and train students self-assessment skills on their learning outcomes as well as their peers'. Despite only being in the first step for students have not been fully proactive and

confident yet, this is considered as an improving leap in the implementation of Children Rights to Participation. As a result, students become more interested in their own opinions and those of peers. Before, students believed that their academic results must be rated by teachers.

In terms of extracurricular activities, primary schools have organized outdoor activities to help students participate in various fields and realize the knowledge they have learnt in real life. During participation, students are instructed to express their views in different areas of social life such as volunteer activities, environmental protection activities, activities to learn about history, etc. Moreover, they are encouraged to express their thoughts and feelings and given the opportunity to communicate, to exchange, to share their concerns on every issue in life. Consequently, they learn to view life incisively and profoundly.

As mentioned above, according to The Ladder of Participation (SIDA & Lund University, 2010), it can be seen that students' level of participation are mainly at *Consulted and informed* and a bit on *Adult-initiated shared decisions with children*. This means that students have not taken the initiative in expressing their thoughts yet. Instead, they only suggest when requested or when teachers (or adults) raise the issue beforehand. This can be explained as the lack of opportunity given to students to show their ideas although a meeting between city leaders and students are taken place annually so that students can speak up. Furthermore, in family context, children's ideas are less appreciated due to traditional norms.

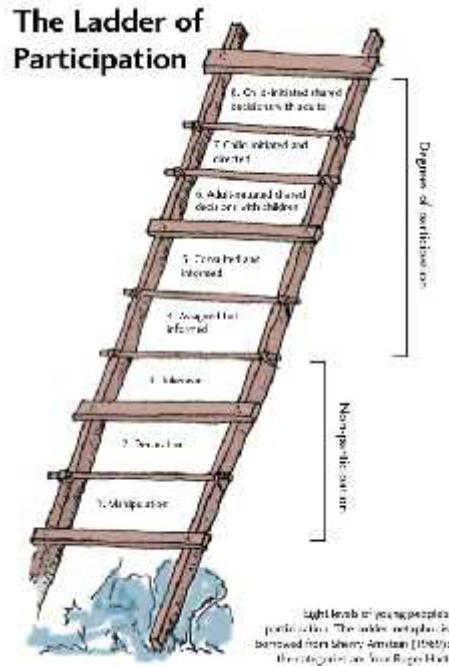


Figure2. The Ladder of Participation

2. Solutions to enhance students' right to express opinions.

2.1. Innovating teaching methods with an emphasis on students' experience.

As stated above, the innovation of teaching methods to promote students' active learning has been conducted by the Primary Education Sector for the past few years. This paper focuses on how teachers show concerns and make use of learners' prior knowledge and experience. It is advisable for teachers to learn and link lesson content with students' understanding. First, teachers should elicit and pose the issues to encourage students to express their thoughts based on their prior knowledge - the experience that they gain in life. Then, with the facilitation of teachers, students take part in activities like discussions, experiments, seeking evidence in order to propose possible solutions for the issues. Therefore, students have the second chance to experience the lesson through activities, help them learn how to solve problems, how to listen and respect peers' opinions.

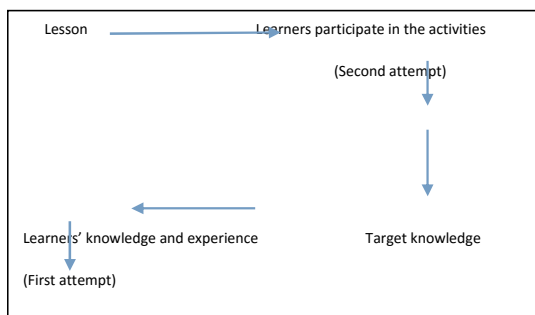


Figure 3. The process of teaching and learning based on students' experience.

Experience-oriented teaching has granted students an opportunity to implement Rights to Participation naturally. Based on their own understanding, students can express opinions freely, making them aware that learning comes from life itself and that they are seeking to solve the problems of life. Learning is truly meaningful work performed by students themselves and for themselves.

3.2. Providing opportunities for students to proactively express their opinions.

Teaching and learning based on students' experience have provided students an opportunity to implement Rights to Participation in a very natural way. Based on their understanding, students find it comfortable to express their opinions, making them realize that learning comes from life itself and that they are seeking to solve the problems of life. Learning is truly meaningful work performed by themselves and for themselves.

2.2. Providing opportunities for students to actively express their opinions.

Students should be given the opportunity to show their ideas naturally and actively without much reliance on teachers. This can be facilitated by extracurricular activities since they are not restricted in the content and time as formally educational ones. Here are a few suggestions to implement this method.

It is essential for freer activities to be included in the extra curriculum whereby students will be able to actively suggest the content and action plan. For instance; the students view their points on life matters or share their personal problems with peers, teachers and students have a dialogue about

an issue raised by students themselves related to their academic and social life, teachers encourage students to reflect, discuss and offer measures to the issues, teachers and students plan to act and evaluate the results so that students are acutely aware of the impact that opinion expressing has on themselves, etc. Hopefully, confidence and autonomy will be gradually strengthened as they are well aware of their Rights to Participation.

For extracurricular activities with fixed content, teachers should follow the steps as discussed in 3.1. However, it is not the teachers raising the issue but students who take the initiative. Teachers should try to arouse students' interests and motivation to take part in the activities. For example, teachers make use of video clips or photos reflecting life matters with which students are familiar so as to assist students in expressing opinions and propose solutions in the natural way. Another suggestion is outdoor activities such as investigating the issue of water use in their neighborhood, learning about the sense of hygiene in the community and working on the issue of gender equality in the society. Not only do these activities help students form and train their life skills but shape the habit of showing concerns about matters of life and being responsible for the community. Thanks to these activities, the students feel the real need to express opinions and propose solutions.

According to the Ladder of Participation, this method has moved up to another level - *Child - Initiated and directed*, making students become thoroughly aware of their rights to express opinions. Besides, the proposed activities are compatible with the ability of teachers and the whole primary education curriculum.

2.3. Giving feedback on students' opinions.

Another important issue is that the process of providing feedback as well as putting students' ideas into action has not received much attention yet whereas this is an indispensable stage in the whole process of participation-giving opinions of students. The feedback has an effect on students' cognitive

process and motives, serving as a premise to promote students' concern about life and actively express their opinions. In addition, the response makes students feel that their contribution to the community has been realized and that their life becomes more meaningful. The feedback can be provided in various ways depending on types of activity; For example, showing a video clip or pictures of work related to the student's comments (both before and after students express opinions) to prove that students' voice has been heard and brought into effect, reading the written responses of the persons in charge related to receiving and processing students' opinions, organizing the meeting between students and the persons involved in the issues that they are concerned to give them a chance to directly listen to the responses.

2.4. Training parents in Children Rights to Participation.

Together with the school, parents play a vital role in putting Rights to Participation of students into practice. Currently, people have a sense of having 1 to 2 children in order to raise them well. The majority of parents are much more interested in the children's scores than their interest in learning when taking learning into consideration (Tran, 2015). Moreover, they are less concerned about the skills that students are trained. The idea that children are 'empty vessel' when it comes to life matters and must be obedient to adults has been deep-rooted in many parents. The following activities are recommended to raise parents' awareness and assist the schools in implementing Rights to Participation. First, the meeting between teachers and parents can be organized to ask for cooperation as well as to help parents recognize the importance of Rights to Participation in children's academic and social life due to the fact that most of them are concerned about their children's academic achievement and that their participation is of great significance for the full development of students themselves and the school itself. Second, it is highly recommended for the school to have Child Rights introduced to help parents get the message that each child is a "real citizen" who lives their own life and has their own

thoughts needed to be expressed and respected. Third, parents should be trained in different activities in cooperation with the school aiming at strengthening the participation of students. An example of this is that parents collaborate with the school in extracurricular activities by encouraging children to participate and strongly express their opinions, listening to and guiding children in showing their viewpoints, accompanying children in outdoor activities such as visiting museums, decorating the school and classroom, supporting children in charity activities. Another example is that parents should know and understand the learning content so as to support teachers in teaching based on students' experience, as mentioned in 3.1. To do this, it is the teachers' job, in parents' meeting, to give parents instructions on how to guide children when they need help for specific problems. A lesson to bear in mind is that parents should patiently listen to and guide children through questions or suggestions and leave the answers for them to find out without letting them know immediately. Parents ought to have a regular talk with children to give them chances to express their feelings focusing on questions like 'Do you enjoy learning today?', 'What is the most difficult thing that you did today?', 'Why did you find it difficult?', 'Are there any rules at school that you find different with those at home?', 'Why do you think there are such differences?' and make sure to provide feedback. Asking for children's help in housework is also a way to help them experience life, making them more aware of their rights and responsibilities. More importantly, parents are encouraged to play educational games with children to help train their skills, gain life experiences and indirectly express their opinions as well like synonym games, picture-storytelling games, room area calculating games, weather forecast, predicting and explaining social phenomena (watching an upcoming children's movie trailer and guess whether it will attract the majority of young audience).

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The Rights to Participation begin with

children confidently having a voice and gradually level up to children raising awareness of their rights and responsibilities at home, at school and in the community. This is a long and strenuous journey as the large number of people has not fully grasped the knowledge of CR yet, not to mention the implementation of CR.

It is of great importance for teachers, schools and parents to help students access and implement Rights to Participation in early childhood, assisting the dissemination of CR in the community as they grow up because 'Children today are the world tomorrow'.

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