Informal and non-formal curriculum: An emerging curriculum agenda in Hong Kong

Lam Tak Shing John and Li Wai Shing
Hong Kong Institute of Education

In recent educational and curriculum reform in Hong Kong, all-round learning and life-wide learning are two of the major concerns on the reform agenda. Also, the first time, curriculum is considered in the Consultant Documents as an embodiment of meaningful and educative learning experiences instead of disciplinary-bound knowledge. In the documents, life-wide learning (the learning experiences that take place beyond the classroom) is considered to be achievable by connecting the formal and informal curriculum. The writers would like to argue that the informal curriculum should be further expanded to include then on-formal curriculum – the kind of learning experiences that are compulsory, more organized and have more explicit goals and involve out of school resources. It is different from the informal curriculum which is operationalized here as extra-curricular activities that are usually voluntary and which run on school’s resources. The informal curriculum is less emphasized and studied than the formal curriculum in the examination-oriented educational scene in Hong Kong, not to mention the non-formal curriculum. Teachers lack the theoretical input, knowledge of the practicalities and the will to utilize the potentials of the two curriculum to the benefits of the students; as a result, the two curricula are marginalized. Nevertheless, the writers have witnessed in recent years the emergence of a very fertile ground for the development of informal and non-formal curriculum, both in the education sector and other sectors. For example, the enterprise sector sees more initiatives that involve partnerships with schools. The establishment of the Quality Education Fund also provides the monetary support for teachers to explore the educational potentials and benefits of informal/non-formal curriculum. The society also calls for the introduction of work-related experiences, skills and attitudes in the curriculum which the informal and non-formal curriculum could provide better channels. The abolition of mechanical drilling and rote-learning in the primary schools plus the reorganization of the subject-based curriculum into eight key learning Areas (KLAs) in the recent curriculum reform have provided comfortable grounds for schools to sail into the hitherto uncharted territories of informal and non-formal curriculum. The assessment mentality and mechanisms in Hong Kong recently have also witnessed a shift from the strictly academic orientations to include also non-academic performances of students, the most influential of which can be seen in the new admission criteria for local universities. Finally, the writers propose some research agenda like teachers’ conception of curriculum and their resultant roles in the curriculum process as two of the major critical factors influencing the success or failure of the implementation of the two curricula.