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Press release

Stories Untold-What happened in schools during the Occupy Movement 2014

The 2014 Occupy Movement was an unprecedented event in terms of its duration, scale and impact. Started on September 28 and ended with a clearance operation at the Admiralty occupy site on December 11, the movement lasted for 79 days. The participation in class boycotts, protests at the occupying site, or Facebook debates by secondary students were also unprecedented.

Although order in schools has generally been restored after the movement, unfounded judgement and doubts towards schools prevail. Speculations of teacher encouragement or school endorsement which led to students' participation in the Movement and class boycotts persist. Demanded by tasks such as handling students' emotions and keeping the normal school operation, principals and teachers did not get a chance to respond to the speculations.

What actually happened in schools are not all known and understood by society at large. What actions did teachers take when knowing students might be at risks at street protests? What did they do when conflicts of political views arose among students as well as between students and their parents? What principles did principals hold when decisions needed to be made on students' request for class boycotts or responding to comments streaming from different stakeholders? How did teachers help their students to walk out of a maze with vast amount of information from different media? What touching stories happened among teachers and students within those 79 days? Through this survey study, we aim to better understand how school principals and teachers responded to students' participation in the Occupy Movement, the principles behind the decision they made and their perceived impact of the movement on students. By disseminating the results of our study, we also wish to reveal the untold stories, allowing schools and society as a whole to make reference to what happened in schools during the Occupy Movement as well as lessons we learnt, so that more appropriate and contributive responses can be made if similar or larger student movement or incidents take place in the future.

The survey study of 'Stories Untold' began in June 2015. Questionnaires were sent to principals and class teachers of S5-S6 of all secondary schools, allowing

respondents' to express their views towards the student movement, describe how they handled the incident and what they thought about their students after the incident. One hundred and sixty-eight (168) schools responded to our survey. The return rate is highly satisfactory despite the fact that the survey was administered during the busiest time of the school year. As far as we know, the return rate is by far the highest among academic studies with similar research topic. Major findings are as follows:

1. The Occupy Movement was a large scale social movement which extended to schools:

- i. Students are generally empathetic or supportive towards the Occupy Movement. According to the findings, as perceived by teachers and principals, about 10% of the students participated in the movement, those who opposed the movement also comprises about 10% of the students population.
- ii. Schools used multiple approaches in handling students' requests and emotions according to situations.

2. Class boycotts in school premises:

- i. Nearly 90% of the schools in the study received students' request for class boycotts, but the duration of class boycott was generally short, mostly lasted for less than 5 days. Only a small number of schools had class boycotts which lasted for more than a week.
- ii. Upholding the school-based spirit, schools adopted different ways to handle class boycotts and arranged different forms of teacher-student discussions about the movement.
- iii. Those who did not participate in class boycotts attended classes as usual. Schools generally ran normally during the Occupy Movement.
- iv. Close to 70% of teachers reported that they made use of the opportunity to facilitate a culture of mutual respects and understanding during the movement. They also presented their perception about the positive and negative impact on students.
- v. Although different views existed among students, no violence cases were reported.

3. Students participated in Occupy Movement:

- i. The majority of students are sympathetic about the movement. However, how they express their empathy towards the movements differed.

4. How schools handled the movement:

- i. Both the principals and teachers generally adopted similar principles in handling the Occupy Movement. They did not impose their political views on students, nor did they encourage or stop students from participating in the movement. Information from different aspects were provided. Students were allowed to make their own decision.
- ii. Almost unanimously, students' safety was the schools' and teachers' top concern.
- iii. During the period of Occupy Movement, teachers had close contact with students. Apart from students' emotions, teachers also helped some of the students resolve family conflicts.
- iv. Teachers remained professionally responsible. They took care of the students' well-being, on campus and beyond.
- v. Principals did not wish to be involved in politics. They preferred their schools to remain neutral. However, they also accepted the reality that schools could not stay out of politics.

5. How schools responded to different stakeholders:

- i. Alumni and parents of students in schools held different views towards the movement, while both parties tried to influence the decisions of the schools. School principals, being caught in the middle, tried to strike a balance with the school policy and make decisions based on students' best interests.

6. The post-movement period:

After the Occupy Movement, schools in general have returned to normal operation faster than the society.

- i. The majority of the teachers thought that the movement did not cause any major changes in students' personal conduct. Some teachers found improvements in students' personal conduct.
- ii. Most of the teachers observed that students' social awareness increased because of the Occupy Movement.

- iii. With respect to the impact of the movement on students' academic progress, close to half of the teachers reported no impact. While 12.8% teachers felt that the movement had negative impact on students' academic progress, 5.3% teachers thought that it brought positive impact.
- iv. In general, the Occupy Movement has not adversely affected the relationship between teachers and students, 17.6% of teacher respondents reported positive impact on their relationship with students.

7. Reflection

The Occupy Movement has not caused large and long-lasting distresses among schools. The cleavage in society has not spread to schools. This could be resulted from the rationales held and measures taken by principals and teachers in handling the students and the incident.

- i. Schools generally showed understanding and tolerance towards those students who joined class boycotts. Nearly 90% of the schools allowed class boycott for a short period of time.
- ii. Schools in general did not ban students from participating in class boycotts or showing empathy for the Occupy Movement or stopping them from participating in the movement. On the contrary, schools made use of the opportunity to turn this incident into a learning opportunity. Different forms of discussions were organized in schools.
- iii. Schools remained neutral in politics and respected students' personal decision. Teachers mainly provided sideline counselling.
- iv. When handling the incident, schools generally put the safety of students first and paid much attention to students' emotional needs. Schools gained trust from the students. Serious cleavage did not take place in school.
- v. The incident caused distress to some principals and teachers. They felt burdened and saddened.

Despite feeling distressed, teachers generally upheld their professionalism. They played a significant role as a mediator, especially when parents' political views were different from their children's.

8. Looking forward

- i. Political conflicts and dilemmas are everywhere in Hong Kong; secondary schools cannot stay in an ivory tower. Educators' professionalism should be upheld. Students should be given opportunities to observe, understand, analyze, and think from different perspectives.
- ii. Secondary education is designed to prepare students for the future. Students are going to face politics in their future life and at work; there is no reason for them to stay away from politics. However, schools should remain neutral in politics.
- iii. School principals and teachers should understand that students might feel distressed or lost among different political views. We need to be patient, caring and be attentive to their healthy development and long-term benefits.
- iv. With opinions streaming from different stakeholders, schools have to face and be prepared to handle views from different parties through communication, and with care.

For photos and presentation slides of the press conference, please visit: <http://web.edu.hku.hk/media/20151022>.

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