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Other Learning Experiences in The Hong Kong School Curriculum: Impact on Students' Approaches to Learning and All-Round Development

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Abstract

The New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum was launched among Hong Kong schools in 2009. Under the NSS Curriculum framework, Other Learning Experiences (OLE), which requires students to participate in five areas of OLE, namely Moral and Civic Education, Community Service, Career-related Experiences, Aesthetic Development and Physical Development, is one of the three major components that complement the study of the four core subjects and 2-3 elective subjects for all-round development of students. Schools are required to offer students school-based activities with no less than 15% of the total curriculum time. The study, mainly employing mixed methods, explores the impact of OLE, as a key curriculum component that advocates experiential learning under such curriculum-time approach, on students' approaches to learning and all-round development. 2318 students from seven secondary schools with different background and intakes were sampled. Although the results could not of themselves provide a warrant for a generalizable positive impact of OLE on students' approaches to learning and learning habits, it is concluded that OLE has a positive influence on students' social-affective development and approaches to learning among the participating schools. The study illuminates the further research of OLE, with regards to its quality pedagogy, whole-school curriculum design, impact on academic study and policy review.

Keywords

Curriculum design, secondary education, experiential learning, approaches to learning, all-round development, study support

Background: What is OLE?

The New Senior Secondary (NSS) curriculum was launched among Hong Kong schools in 2009. Under the new curriculum framework, Other Learning Experiences (OLE), This encompasses five areas, namely Moral and Civic Education, Community Service, Career-related Experiences, Aesthetic Development and Physical Development. It was introduced as one of the three major components that aims to complement subject learning with the aim of promoting all-round development and as a complement to subject learning.

Under a ***curriculum time approach***, students are expected to participate in OLE lessons or activities with no less than 15% of total curriculum time spent both within and outside the school timetable normal (Curriculum Development Council, 2009; Curriculum Development Council, 2017, Suppl. pp. 3-22; Curriculum Development Council, 2022). Schools are advised to place more emphasis on ***experiential learning*** foregrounding individual choice, interests, needs and aspirations in the design of activities within the school curriculum framework (Beard & Wilson, 2006; Kelly, 1999; Kolb, 1984). Reflection is the core of each OLE activity designed to enable whole person development and to promote changing attitudes to learning and to social development (Curriculum Development Council, 2009).

In Hong Kong, it is widely accepted that the education system was highly focused on academic subjects and examinations, with very little emphasis on all-round education. In this light, the Education Commission launched the Education Reform that supports one of the five key principles called, 'Life-wide Learning' (2000):

> 'Learning must transcend the constraints of academic subjects and examinations. Students should be able to take part in a comprehensive range of learning activities both inside and outside the classroom. In the new millennium, we must adopt a broader definition for education in order that students are able to develop multiple abilities. Activities that take place inside and outside the classroom contribute equally to all-round education.' (ibid, p37)

With Life-wide Learning as the guiding principle, OLE was introduced within a 'curriculum-time approach', so as to encourage young people and their teachers to value these experiential learning activities equally with subject-based curriculum and assessment at Senior Secondary levels (Education Manpower Bureau, 2004). In addition, with support of the Education Bureau of Hong Kong, Heads of Universities Committee (HUCOM) have been proactive in recognising student participation and achievements in OLE together with information-rich documents presented by the student himself or herself. This is known as Student Learning Profile (SLP) and now integral to the university admission process:

> 'We will continue to give broad support to the implementation of OLE and are ready to recognise SLPs as documents of good reference value. Practical arrangements will also be made to facilitate the use of the SLP as a reference document in the admission process' (HUCOM, 2008).

Despite the government's substantial investment of resources (e.g. the Hong Kong Jockey Club Life-wide Learning Fund) its approach and impact have been questioned by many school leaders (Ho, 2017) and local academics (SCMP, 2017; Shek & Li, 2016). This has been despite the added investment in professional training, encouraging schools to organise co-curricular activities or 'life-wide learning' activities to support students' whole person development, the opposition has been powerful due to the demand for more time in the preparation of the university-entry examinations, namely Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education. Nevertheless, HKSAR government remained to reveal their support on Life-wide Learning development by launching the Life-wide Learning Grant in the 2019/20 school year, aiming to provide public sector schools with recurrent funds for students' learning experience. Schools are encouraged to utilize the annual grant in out-of-classroom experiential learning opportunities, excluding small-scale or single projects in order to enliven and enrich the learning experiences of students to broaden their horizons, enhance their learning motivation and interest, and foster their whole-person development (Education Bureau, 2019). In general, a primary school will receive approximately HKD$760,000 and a secondary school will receive approximately HKD$1,170,000 subject to the number of students in individual school (Education Bureau, 2021). The amount will be also adjusted every year according to the movement of the Composite Consumer Price Index.

In light of the supports from government initiative since education reform in 2000, experiential Learning activities in local school education are not, however, thoroughly researched. In a wider global context, such activities often have been described as extra-curricular activities (ECA). For example, in the United Kingdom Study Support or Out-of-school Hours Learning have adopted an 'ECA approach', embracing many experiential learning activities outside of normal lesson time (DfEE, 1998; Sharp et al., 1999). These include breakfast clubs, sporting, service, mentoring, cultural and community activities, aimed at enabling young

people to become more effective learners. As a policy of the New Labour Government in the UK, a national framework was established for schools to organise their study support programmes in order to raise student achievement (ibid). Such national initiative was based on pilot studies in a London borough and in Scotland (MacBeath, 1993; Yip, 1997).

With regard to the UK case, the Creativity, Activity, Service (CAS) in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma adopts a similar ECA approach. It requires students to complete CAS activities (usually outside school hours) as part of the Diploma Programme, with no curriculum time allocation prescribed. However, strict record-keeping of student participation is required, unlike the looser system in OLE (IBO, 1991). The recent CAS impact study (Hayden et al., 2017), which includes views and perceptions from 7973 IB students, 903 ex-IB students and 490 CAS co-ordinators, reveals that CAS has a direct impact on students' attributes such as risk-taking, and communication skills. In the report, some participants viewed CAS record-keeping as repetitive and burdensome, and some regarded reflection on activities as a 'double-edge sword' – that is, both a 'help' to learning and a 'hindrance' to learning due to the amount of work requited for record-keeping (ibid, p93).

A similar survey was conducted by the Curriculum Development Institute (CDI), Education Bureau (2015, p37) on OLE among 450 schools. Almost all teacher co-ordinators agreed that schools were able to provide student-focused OLE, and most students (85%) agreed that they could choose the OLE activities that they liked. The great majority of teachers (94%) made use of various strategies to facilitate students' reflection on OLE and OLE was found to be increasingly well coordinated, with emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of activities, and accessible to all students regardless of their socio-economic background. This study focused on investigating the impact of OLE on students' all-round development and learning - a vehicle to promote experiential learning, within a curriculum-time approach,

Impact of OLE

OLE was established with a clear list of curriculum purposes that would align with the Learning Goals of the overall school curriculum framework. As explicitly pointed out in the official curriculum guide,

> "… values and attitudes are the most difficult to 'teach' as subjects because they are best developed through personal experiences in which particular values and attitudes are practised and discussed. OLE, which aims to bridge this gap in the senior secondary (SS) curriculum, are building on the foundations of the five Essential Learning Experiences in Basic Education" (CDC, 2002).

In other words, OLE was not a series of disconnected activities with a programme-specific impact but one which 'encompasses a wide range of technical, social and academic skills' feeding back into varying aspects of subject curricula learning in the NSS (Curriculum Development Council, 2009). Parallels may be drawn with the UK's National Evaluation of Study Support in which experiential learning opportunities were judged to have a positive influence on students' attainment, attitudes and attendance in schools. Empirical findings demonstrated that regular participation of Study Support enhanced student academic achievements in GCSE subjects, attitudes towards learning as well as to their school experience (MacBeath et al., 2001). In this light, the impact of OLE as seen as two folds:

- OLE's impact on students' all-round development (e.g. leadership, collaboration);
- OLE's impact on students' learning capability, approaches and attitudes (e.g. approaches to learning)

With respect to all-round development, the study focuses on social-affective attributes, advocated in the Hong Kong curriculum's key learning goals including OLE's expected outcomes and various generic skills. For example, 'goals of life' is specifically selected in the investigation because it is one of the Seven Learning Goals of the secondary curriculum (EDB, 2017). Similarly, leadership, independent learning capacity and collaboration are chosen since they are either implicitly or explicitly emphasised in the existing local curriculum as the Generic Skills (ibid).

Although there is other literature which demonstrates the positive impacts of experiential learning as large-scale schools initiatives on students' non-academic development in the Western world (e.g. Hayden et al., 2017; Mahoney et al., 2005; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Sharp et al., 1999), there is comparatively little research in Hong Kong contexts. As well as the powerful examination culture which is well-documented, most

research fails to make explicit the connections with its impact on student learning.

In this context, the impact of OLE on wider approaches to learning is the subject of study because it has been established that effective learning in academic subjects is highly correlated with deep approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999; Entwistle, 1988; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983). This is explained by learners' greater inclination inclined to be more meaning-seeking, making connections between units, relating new things with prior knowledge and linking contents with real life, in their learning. Such approaches to learning may be attributed to many factors, such as prior learning experiences, traditional values, motivation and personality traits (ibid). The second part of the study explores to the extent to which OLE contributes to change in attitudes and approaches to learning among Hong Kong students.

Method

The study adopts a mixed methods approach. Seven secondary schools in Hong Kong were selected according to their bandings (1, 2, and 3), a broad local indicator of student intake in terms of academic ability. Two schools from Band 1, three schools from Band 2 and two schools from Band 3 participated in the study. In the beginning of school year (T1), 2318 students, which represent the whole year groups of Secondary 4 (S4) and Secondary 5 (S5) levels of the seven schools completed relevant units of the Assessment of Personal Affective Social Outcomes II (APASO II). The relevant units are as follows:

- Interpersonal relationship
- Attitude to School
- Motivation
- Learning Competency
- Independent Learning Capacity
- Goals of Life
- Self-concept
- Leadership

APASO II is a widely-used government-initiated tool on all-round development for school self-evaluation and continuous self-improvement on understanding students' affective and social development (Education Bureau, 2011; Moore, Mok, Chan & Lai, 2006; Wu & Mok, 2017). This same assessment was conducted again among the students 12 months later (T2). Students' participation in OLE was recorded and analysed at both T1 and T2 stages. Following this students were grouped into three OLE participation groups, that high, medium and low. One-way ANOVA test and t-test were used to explore the connection between OLE participation and the APASO II scores across the eight units.

Results

Students' participation in OLE, which was recorded at T2, was found to be associated with increased ratings of all APASO-II outcomes. Specifically, students who participated often in OLE (High) rated themselves higher than students who either fairly often participated (Medium) or seldom participated (Low) in OLE in terms of all APASO II units. In turn, students who fairly often participated (Medium) in this area rated higher than students who seldom participated (Low) in all the APASO-II units.

In parallel to this survey on social-affective development, two schools (both Band 2) from the sample group participated in an in-depth study on further evaluating the OLE impact on approaches to learning. 354 students (from S4 and S5 year groups) completed an inventory, Studying in School Inventory (SASI) (Selmes, 1987) in T1 and T2. In-depth interviews were conducted among 18 students to explore their study life in senior secondary years at T2.

Table 1: APASO II Scores among OLE Participation Groups (at T2)

			APASO II Score							
		Base	Interpersonal relationship	Goals of life	Learning Comp.	Leadership	Attitude to School	Independent Learning Capacity	Motivation	Self-concept
OLE Participation Group (T2)	Low (a)	622	2.98	2.87	2.83	2.79	2.66	2.64	2.63	2.64
	Medium (b)	1090	**3.07**	**2.98**	**2.88**	**2.91**	**2.77**	**2.76**	**2.71**	**2.71**
	High (c)	556	**3.19**	**3.08**	**2.99**	**3.01**	**2.88**	**2.86**	**2.85**	**2.80**

Note 1: One-way ANOVA test and t-test which are significant at 0.05 level are bolded.

However, owing to the voluntary nature of OLE, it is difficult to draw the conclusion that participation in OLE itself may be attributed to the increase of APASO II. This is because it could be counter-argued that students who are generally keen in school life with high APASO scores, are likely to join OLE activities. With this in mind, the data were further analyzed as second step in order to identify whether any students who had changed their level of OLE participation from T1 to T2, had also a significantly increased rating in APASO II. The findings are tabulated below:

Table 2: APASO II scores against the participation change of OLE from T1 to T2

		Increased OLE participation from T1 to T2	Decreased OLE participation from T1 to T2	Same OLE participation from T1 to T2
T1	Interpersonal relationship	3.04	3.07	3.03
T2		**3.09*** ⇧	3.07	3.05
T1	Attitude to School	2.76	2.78* ⇩	2.78
T2		2.80* ⇧	2.74	2.77
T1	Motivation	2.70	2.75* ⇩	2.69
T2		**2.74*** ⇧	2.71	2.68
T1	Learning Competency	2.84	2.90	2.86
T2		**2.90*** ⇧	2.89	2.89
T1	Independent Learning Capacity	2.74	2.77* ⇩	2.73
T2		**2.77*** ⇧	2.74	2.74
T1	Goals of Life	2.96	3.01* ⇩	2.95
T2		**2.99*** ⇧	2.97	2.95
T1	Self-concept	2.68	2.70	2.65
T2		**2.73*** ⇧	2.70	2.69
T1	Leadership	2.85	2.89	2.84
T2		**2.92*** ⇧	2.89	2.92* ⇧

* significant difference in means are bolded; *p<0.05 (Bolded)

There is a clear trend that those students who increased their OLE participation between T1 and T2, also had increased in their APASO II scores in all units. In turn, those whose OLE participation had decreased, their APASO II scores decreased or unchanged in most units. The changes of APASO II scores between T1 and T2, for those who have the same level of OLE participation, are generally insignificant.

In the in-depth study with a smaller sample, similar 'two-step' analysis was conducted including (i) firstly the comparison of SASI scores between OLE participation groups at T1 and (ii) secondly the comparison of SASI scores between the increased OLE participation group, the decreased and unchanged OLE participation counterpart

Table 3: Comparison of SASI scores between OLE participation groups

		High OLE	Medium OLE	Low OLE
T1	Deep approach to learning	32.73	31.76	31.3
T2		32.5	31.29	31.06
T1	Surface approach to learning	31.45	31.01	30.74
T2		31.37	30.13	30.18

Results showed that students in all OLE participation groups generally had a lower SASI score at T2 than at T1, except those who increased their OLE participation level during the period. Such increase of SASI scores among the increased OLE participation group is particularly remarkable in the deep approach to learning (See Fig 1 & 2).

Secondly, 75 students who increased OLE participation (i.e. 'High new' group in Fig 1 & 2) also has particularly high scores in two items in SASI (Deep approach) unit.

- Item 10 – "I am fascinated by some of the work I do at school"
- Item 42 – "When reading I try to work out the connections between different aspects I come across."

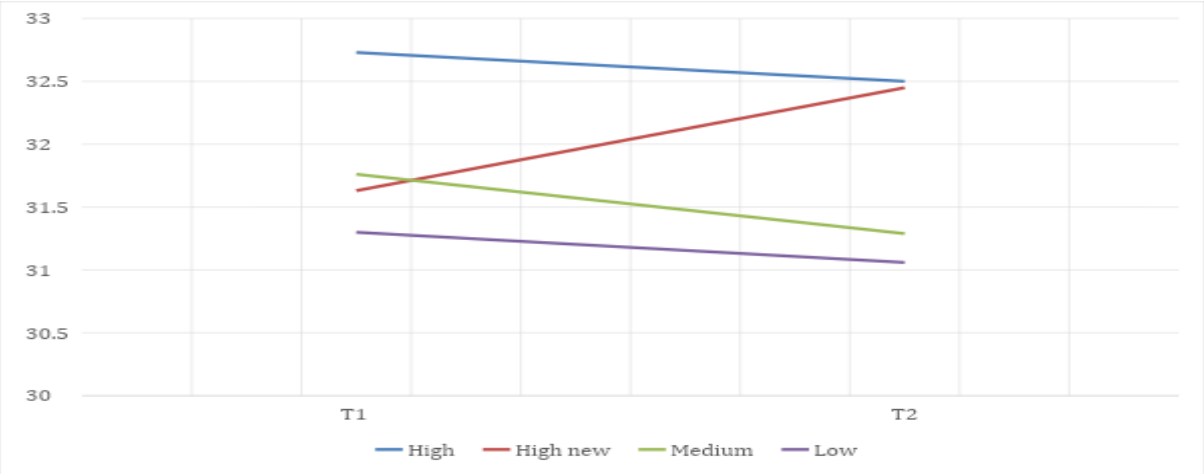

Figure 1: SASI scores (Deep Approach) among OLE Participation Groups (T1 & T2)

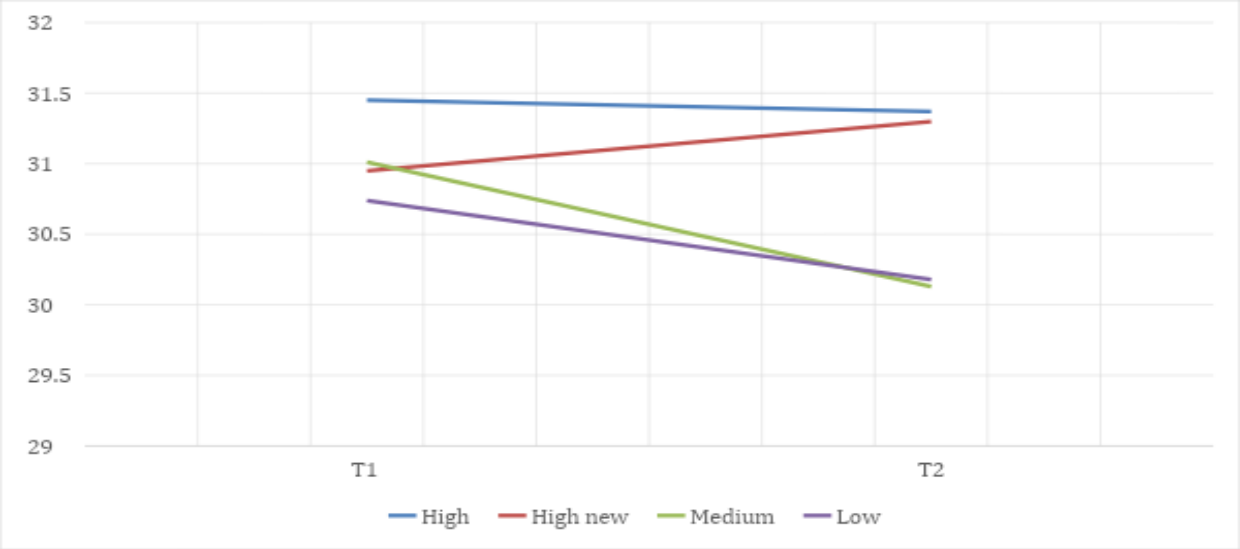

Figure 2: SASI scores (Surface Approach) among OLE Participation Groups (T1 & T2)

18 students from a total of five secondary schools were interviewed in both a group and individual setting, to further explore the topic (Yip & Fung,2019). The interview data shows that:

OLE are worthwhile experiences to the participating students and found that there are some links between their academic study and the learning in OLE activities.

> 'I have no regret about going to this [leadership] activity since I can understand more about my learning ways and it helped me understand my weaknesses and ways of improvement.' (Student C)

It also made an impact on widening students' horizons and perspectives in their HKDSE study, especially Liberal Study.

> 'Yes, that [OLE] helps my studying especially Liberal Study because I get all different views from different people. … Whereas I put it small bits and revise. That's what I learned from doing the service project.' (Student B)

The importance of OLE was easily seen in the interview data, especially among high participation groups. Students responded positively on OLE and valued the connectivity between the types of learning in school – i.e. subject learning and OLE. Some learning strategies were learned from OLE and made impact on subject-studying.

> 'I think the activity helped me in subject learning. It inspired me that I need to prepare more. From then, I started the habit of preparing for every lesson in all subjects.' (Student A)

'I can see that there is a quite good connection between OLE and learning for HKDSE'. (Student C)

On the other hand, pressures from the HKDSE experienced by the students were profoundly observed in every interviewee, irrespective to their OLE participation in the senior secondary study. Such worry decreases the desire to join OLE due to perceivable lack of time.

> 'I wish to join more [OLE] activities but I have exams to do. Come to think about it, I am worried about this.' (Student A)

'No time, absolutely no time [to join] when going to S5!' (Student B)

Apart from the general worry of the HKDSE, many interviewees pointed out a time-consuming practical concern on completing the School-based Assessment (SBA), which is required in the HKDSE. It usually happens at S5 and occupies student time to prepare.

> 'I have to prepare for my SBA works in most subjects. I do not have time to join activities.' (Student H)

> 'No, I cannot apply when I learned from this [OLE] activity because the work (SBA) requires specific skills and we need to repeat tasks to practice them.' (Student F)

Other than the above perception about the impact of OLE on personal learning, most respondents had a common feeling of being special by attending OLE. Many were able to easily recall the experience with a special meaning to their personal growth and learning trajectory. The four main categories/themes are as follows:

- They felt special in that they had the right to choose whether to engage in many OLE activities;
- They felt privileged for the opportunity to participate;
- They felt they were treated differently by teachers; and
- They felt that they were receiving personal attention.

Discussion

Impact on Social-affective development

The mixed-method study shows the positive cumulative effect of experiential learning activities among senior secondary students in the condition that these activities are flexibly and intentionally arranged within the curriculum time of Hong Kong schools. As illustrated by many previous research in other countries (e.g. Hayden et al, 2017; Kulundu & Hayden, 2002; MacBeath et al, 2001; Yip, 1997), such experiential learning made similar positive impact on students' social affective development such as leadership, goals of life, learning competency, independent learning capacity, interpersonal relationship that are most essential for effective life-long learning and helps to achieve the overall curriculum goals. However, since OLE is implemented in a school-based, non-prescriptive manner, schools are well known to take a very wide range of attitudes and approaches towards OLE among the management. When the HKDSE requirements are seen not to be fulfilled, schools (and students) will not hesitate to 'sacrifice' OLE to respond, as shown in the interview data.

Degree of Transfer to Academic Studying

Apart from social-affective development, OLE has a strong ground to promote better learning attitudes and approaches, though the impact of OLE specifically on student learning should be further researched. The study demonstrates some degree of positive influence of OLE onto individual learning habits (e.g. deep approach to Learning), especially among the frequent OLE participants. Furthermore, the APASO II data also suggests that students' independent learning capacity

and learning competence, which are closely related to academic learning, are enhanced owing to OLE (Lai et al., 2018). In principle, the degree of such OLE transfer depends on the designs of experiential learning and the expectation of the activity designers. As literature suggests, teachers may use different pedagogical techniques, e.g. 'bridging approach' (Shayer & Adey, 2002), student-led strategies (Zou et al., 2015) to design the reflection activities for such wider transfer. However, it is quite clear that the advent of HKDSE may diminish such influence since students are more likely to choose a more passive, surface approach to learning, in their everyday practice.

A Good Practice in Curriculum Approach?

Experiential learning has been frequently adopted as effective means for school improvement and curriculum development in education sector worldwide. There are several approaches in terms of policy implementation, namely diploma-requirement approach, extracurricular activities approach and in this case, the curriculum-time approach (See Table in Note 1). These approaches have their own strengths and challenges, in the light of ensuring check and balance measures, building incentives among stake-holders and optimising workload. They are highly context-oriented and the design emphasises vary from jurisdictions.

In Hong Kong, the main hindrances against the promotion of experiential learning in school curriculum are as follows:

- Strong examination culture in Hong Kong makes these 'impactful' learning opportunities appeared to be less important and therefore, teachers often viewed that the learning timetable is always tight with no rooms for non-examinable items, especially in Senior Secondary years (Davison, 2023). Teachers reported having little locus of control over assessment decisions, and joining OLE activities is sometimes viewed as 'time-consuming' or 'no real use' among stakeholders. In this light the study partly addresses such mindset to encourage students to participate in OLE for acquiring positive attributes (e.g. Leadership, Inter-personal relationships, Goals of Life, Attitude to School, Motivation) that would motivate life-long learning in both short and long run. In addition, such curriculum-time approach may be considered to start at earlier years of secondary education (MacBeath, 2010).
- Failure to see the connections between these activities and learning examination subjects will lead to unnecessarily dichotomising school learning into academic study and non-academic activities. From the study, we can see the direct influence of OLE in students' approaches to learning and the enhancement of independent learning competences, even when the participating schools and their stakeholders do not generally realise such study-related benefits. There is also the factor of students' life experience shaping their OLE experience, and vice versa, as social experiences are contextualized by cognitive and socio-personal history (Billett, 2009). Further research should be conducted to focus on the dynamics of such transfer and to explore effective pedagogy in maximising the influence of OLE activities on students' own learning habits and approaches.
- Quality issues in OLE are to be further investigated and addressed from a variety of perspectives, including activity organisation, whole-school curriculum leadership as well as policy-partnerships evaluation. The study has revealed several key elements of successful OLE both at activity (e.g. 'being special', pedagogy of reflection, high personal attention) and school level (e.g. balanced OLE programme with variety). Some of the findings echo with the recent IBO study that suggested a pedagogy which can support personalisation and a communication strategy in conveying the values and purpose of the activities, with the aim to have a positive impact on students (Hayden et al., 2017). Again, little empirical research on quality of OLE is conducted (Yip, 2006). As one of the three major components in the SS curriculum, policy makers and school leaders do not afford to tolerate any marginalisation of OLE, in the light of realising the educational aims of whole person development and life-long learning (Education Commission, 2000).

In conclusion, OLE makes a positive 'broad impact' on students' social-affective development (esp.

Motivation, Independent Learning capacity, Goals of Life and Attitudes to school) among the research schools.

Based on the findings, there is evidence that OLE makes a positive impact on students' approaches to learning. Responses from a few items suggest that OLE, as a curriculum component with specific time allocation, has influenced students' adoption of Deep Approach positively in the area of 'making connections' and 'valuing intrinsic joy in learning' during their everyday study. Further research on such transfer dynamics is needed. The study also shows that the pressure and work related to HKDSE 'cancels out' the positive effect made by OLE on student learning approaches and habits.

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Note 1: Summary comparison between CAS (in IB), OLE (in HK) and Study Support

	Creativity, Action & Service (CAS) component in International Baccalaureate	**Study Support**/ Out-of-school hours Learning	**Other Learning Experiences** (OLE) in New Senior Secondary Curriculum
Place	IB Schools in the world	U.K.	Hong Kong
Policy Emphasis	As one of the Diploma Requirements of IB IBO (2001)	As Learning Opportunities DfEE (1998)	As Learning Entitlements in the Curriculum EDB (2009)
Implementation Approach of Experiential Learning	*Diploma-requirement* Approach	*Extra-curricular Activities* Approach	*Curriculum time* Approach
Research Study	Hayden, 2017;	MacBeath, et al 2001	Yip, S. 2017 (This study)
No. of students	7973	8000	2318
Key Findings - Impacts on students	CAS helps nurturing students to be: (p47, 90-93) ● inquirers ● knowledgeable ● thinkers ● communicators ● principled ● open-minded ● caring ● risk-takers ● balanced ● reflective	Study Support helps students with: ● Improved attainment at GCSE ● Improved attitude to school ● Improved School Attendance	OLE makes positive impact on students' social-affective development and learning: ● Interpersonal relationship ● Self-concept ● Learning Competence ● Independent Learning Capacity ● Goals of Life ● Leadership ● Attitude to school ● Motivation ● Deep approach to Learning