

**In It Together:**  
**An Inquiry into a School-Based Curriculum Approach Called**  
**'Free Learning'**

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## **Abstract**

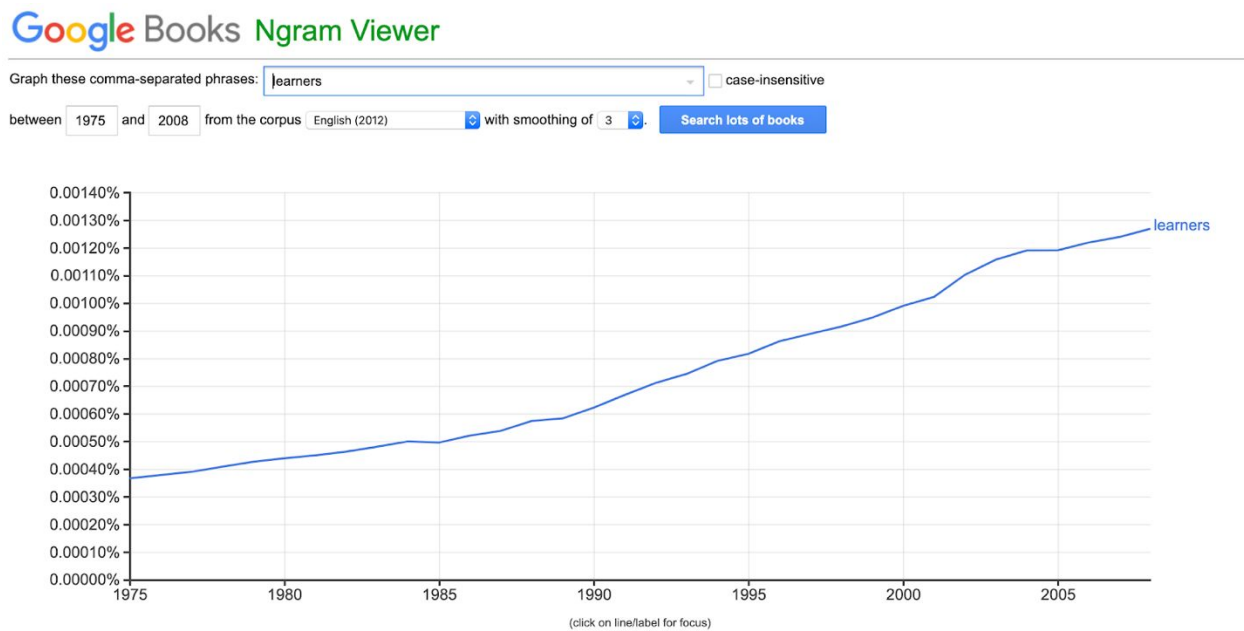
This report presents findings from a case study, conducted in 2018 and 2019, that focused on the investigation of 'Free Learning', a novel curriculum approach developed by an international school in Hong Kong. Free Learning is one of the school-based curricular practices that can be considered an act of resistance against educational discourses centred around the 'learnification' of education, which often implies an increase in 'learning freedom' for students and a decrease in significance and value of the teacher role. The case study looked into the role of the teacher and student learning in Free Learning, to what extent Free Learning has an effect on both and how the student-teacher relationship is 'reconsidered'. Findings show that the Free Learning approach allows for a student-teacher relationship that is reciprocal, and that is neither focused on outcomes nor performance. These findings are discussed and framed, and suggestions are made for adoption and further research of Free Learning in different educational settings.

### *Keywords:*

Curriculum approach, learnification, purposes of education, student-teacher relationship

## 1. Introduction

The language of education seems to have changed significantly over the last 45 years. A search using the Google Ngram Viewer<sup>1</sup> confirms these assumptions. In printed sources in English the word 'learners' is on the rise since 1975 (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* The evolution of the use of the word 'learners'. This table shows how the use of the word 'learners' in printed texts in English has increased between 1975 and 2008.

This change in word use can be an indicator for a change in discourse in particular fields and disciplines (Foucault, 1980). In the field of education, the language seems to have shifted from 'teaching' to 'learning'. The Google Ngram viewer result is reflected in education literature

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<sup>1</sup> The Google Ngram Viewer is an online search engine that generates the frequency of single words or phrases in printed texts, published between 1500 and 2008, presented in a graph. This search was done in February 2020.

(academic and non-academic) as well as in general education discourse and practices, where the words 'teachers' and 'students' are often replaced by 'learners' and education is *re-branded* as 'learning', the so-called 'learnification of education' (Biesta, 2008, 2017). Moreover, this shift in language could be considered an indication of a change in the way education is perceived and done (Biesta, 2017).

This shift towards *learnification* often implies a different role for the teacher, with more responsibility and freedom for students (or better: learners). Early examples of this trend can be found in the work of philosopher Ivan Illich (1970), and even earlier, in the foundation by A.S. Neill of Summerhill School in 1921 in England. Illich as well as Neill pleaded for an educational system that would free students from the confinements of an authoritarian, industrial and managerial school environment and curriculum. In the field of curriculum theory and studies, Michael Apple and William Pinar were some of the first to critique this scientific and industrial curriculum model of education (Young, 2013) and paved the way for critical theory in education in the 1970s. Yet, in all of these academic as well as practitioners' examples of *learnification*, there was a clear role and responsibility for student as well as teacher, with an emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between both. However, today, *learnification* has often evolved into a very different model of education, with students venturing into an learning journey known under the common and popular denominator of 'independent learning': do what and whenever *they* want, with the teacher being a 'peer at the rear' rather than a 'sage on the stage' (Biesta, 2017). With these shifts also come shifts in the student-teacher relationship, where teachers seem to have become secondary, and learning is entirely in the

hands of the student. Yet, ironically enough, whilst teachers have become ‘peers at the rear’, they are at the same time being held accountable for the learning outcomes of students, having to keep detailed records of testing scores, as part of the current outcomes-based, performative and competitive discourse in education (Ball, 2003).

The case study presented in this report challenges these developments in education and illustrates a *reconsideration* of the roles of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’, emphasizing the importance of a reciprocal student-teacher relationship as well as a thoughtful approach to curriculum through a qualitative investigation into one particular, novel curriculum approach called ‘Free Learning’. The study is focused on the role of the teacher and student learning in ‘Free Learning’ (hereafter ‘FL’), a ‘pedagogical approach where students chart their own learning through a varied map of challenges and experiences’ (International College Hong Kong, 2016c, n.p.). FL was created and implemented by International College Hong Kong (hereafter ‘ICHK’) and serves as the anchor point in the development of the abovementioned arguments, centred around the following research questions:

How is FL enacted at ICHK?

How does FL influence student learning and the role of the teacher?

The report starts by briefly introducing the local, regional and transnational contexts under which ICHK operates. The subsequent sections present the circumstances, conceptualisation and implementation of FL, as well as how FL is an example of a particular curriculum approach.

Then, the methodology, data collection and analysis are laid out before presenting the findings, which are organised in two main sections: the effect of FL on the role of the teacher and on student learning. The report concludes with suggestions for further implementation and research of FL in different educational settings.

## **2. Context**

### **2.1. Local, regional and transnational contexts of the school**

Schools never operate in isolation, but are subject to external policies, regulations and trends, from the local to the transnational level. The interconnectivity, relationality as well as impact of organizations at transnational level should not be underestimated (Lingard, 2013). Global dynamics are thus also reflected locally, as is the case in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong has experienced a significant growth in schools offering foreign curricula in an already highly dense international school landscape, with the International Baccalaureate (hereafter 'IB') being one of the more popular foreign curricula in the region (Bunnell, 2011; ISC Research, 2018): 65 schools in Hong Kong are offering one or more IB programmes (IB, 2019). In the academic year 2018-2019, Hong Kong counted 61 schools offering a non-local curriculum (Education Bureau Hong Kong, 2019). A recent development is the growing number of local families sending their child(ren) to a school offering a non-local curriculum, with English as the medium of instruction. Therefore, there is an excessive demand for places in schools, and with this an opportunity for further growth, resulting in fierce competition. For local families, the



preference for a non-local curriculum, English medium of instruction school is based on the assumption that this type of schooling will give their child access to elite universities worldwide (Bates, 2011). This development adds an additional competitive factor to the already competitive scene of (international) education in Hong Kong, with a high number of schools, densely located in a small geographical area, all bidding for local as well as non-local students.

ICHK, the international school where the research was conducted, is located in the far north of Hong Kong and therefore physically separated from the majority of international schools in the city centre. It caters for families, local as well as non-local, who live in the less urban north of the New Territories. ICHK has a kindergarten, primary and secondary section, yet only ICHK Secondary will be looked at in this study, as FL is not implemented at ICHK kindergarten and primary level. ICHK Secondary was founded in 2009 and offers a school-based curriculum from Year 7-9, the International General Certificate of Education (hereafter 'IGCSE') for Years 10- 11 and the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (hereafter 'IB DP') and Mastery Transcript (hereafter 'MT') for Years 12-13. The school is also accredited by the Council of International Schools (hereafter 'CIS') and had about 380 students in October 2019.

ICHK, by offering the IGCSE as well as the IB DP and by being accredited by CIS, is impacted by the policies, practices and discourses of these transnational bodies. This is reflected in their curriculum offer and assessment structure. Apart from these transnational dynamics, there are also local dynamics at play, as elaborated on above. Despite these dynamics and ICHK's affiliation with the aforementioned transnational bodies, the school questions the

performance-driven and highly competitive tenor, and the impact this has on the teacher as well as student learning. This is the main reason why the school has a number of school-based initiatives in place that are of a different nature and that seem to be an increasing motivator for parents to send their children to ICHK. The school-based initiatives are most widely implemented in Year 7-9, but cross over to the senior years, in addition to the IGCSE, IB DP and MT structural implementations. All these initiatives are centred around what ICHK calls the '5+1 Model'.

## **2.2. International College Hong Kong's 5+1 Model**

The 5+1 Model is a pastoral model for guiding staff in

sympathetic understanding and appreciation of the mentality of secondary school learners as well as giving guidance to teachers about how best to engage with pre-teen and teenage learners so as to boost their chances of success and to place student wellbeing at the centre of school life' (ICHK, 2016a, n.p.).

The model was created and conceptualised by the current Principal, Toby Newton, and implemented in 2013. It is centred around the insights of five educators: Carol Dweck and her work on growth mindset; Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development; Kieran Egan's cognitive dispositions; Erik Erickson's psychosocial theory of personality development, and Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis theory on interpersonal communication<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> This report only gives a brief account of the 5+1 Model, given its scope. Detailed background about the model can be accessed here: <https://www.ichk.edu.hk/wpcontent/uploads/2016/06/ICHK-51-Model-Overview.pdf>

A statement in one of the school's brochures further confirms its approaches, mission and more broadly, the way the school envisages education:

The goal of school is to prepare young people for the lives they want to lead. Attaining academic results is a significant part of this, but so too is promoting the personal qualities that underpin good learning - and living - habits. (ICHK, 2019, n.p.)

The 5+1 Model reflects the importance of the student-teacher relationship as presented in the introductory discussion and addresses elements that it considers lacking in global educational discourses and approaches. The model guides the teacher - in particular through Berne's Transactional Analysis theory (ICHK, 2019) - in how to build rapport with students, how to support them in their learning journey by offering the right amount of challenge (rooted in the work of Dweck and Vygotsky). In order to build this relationship, teachers need to have a thorough understanding of the psychology of the child (rooted in the work of Egan and Erickson), but also, of themselves. The teacher is thus acting as a 'more knowing other', but also as a guide and support in holistically developing healthy human beings.

In addition to the 5+1 Model, ICHK has developed nine Approaches to Learning (hereafter 'ATLs')<sup>3</sup> that are at the heart of all teaching and learning practices at the school. Instead of numeric grading and standardised tests, ICHK uses these ATLs for Year 7 – Year 9 to give feedback to students regarding the development of habits of the mind and the actions and

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<sup>3</sup> ICHK's approaches to learning can be consulted here:  
<https://www.ichk.edu.hk/home/our-school/secondary/approaches-to-learning/>

behaviours to which these lead. In Year 10 and upwards, the ATLs are applied in addition to the IGCSE and IBDP assessment structures. The nine ATLs are: attitude to challenge, resilience and motivation, attitude to feedback and advice, organization, showing initiative and making choices, working independently, working with other students, conducting myself and relating to others, contribution to class (see section 5). One example of a practice which is strongly rooted in the 5+1 Model with the ATLs as a benchmark for student growth, is Free Learning<sup>4</sup>.

### **3. Free Learning as a curriculum approach**

This section first introduces the way FL is conceptualised and implemented and then positions FL within the field of curriculum theory.

#### **3.1. Free Learning: What and how**

FL was developed by ICHK's current Director of Technology and Assessment, Ross Parker, and can be described as follows:

Free Learning offers students the opportunity to chart their own learning through a varied map of challenges and experiences. It is fun, engaging and highly motivating, promoting both individuality and teamwork. Free Learning offers an extensive menu of

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<sup>4</sup> Free Learning is not a stand alone initiative, and therefore can not be entirely separated from local social structures, transnational tensions, dynamics and powers. This is also reflected in the analytical framework applied in this study, whereby not only ICHK's ATLs are taken into consideration, but also the IB Standards and Practices, as these are considered general guidelines for IB schools. However, given the limited and specific scope of the study, matters related to local and transnational tensions, dynamics and powers are not investigated here. This is worth a separate and in-depth investigation.

learning experiences from which students can select to match their interests and ambitions (ICHK, 2019, n.p.).

In April 2015, ICHK introduced an FL pilot and in August 2015 it was officially implemented in the ICT curriculum in Years 7-9. As of the academic year 2017-2018, FL was also implemented in the Science, Mathematics, English, Media Studies and Physical Education curriculum for more senior year groups as an additional feature. The school is planning to expand FL to other curricula in the future. In the ICT FL course, students go to regular classes and have a minimum of 50% contact time with the teacher, but they have the opportunity to go through units of knowledge and skills at their own pace, choosing from FL units hosted on the school's in-house developed online learning platform. The teacher is always present in the classroom to start the session collectively before students start working on FL individually or in small groups, thereby guided by the teacher.

The content of the FL units is created by four ICHK teachers who collaborated on the development of units during designated time. In addition, ten students have also developed FL units within their area of expertise. Units are connected to the learning goals of that particular course, offering knowledge-based as well as skill-based content, connected to *real* problems or cases.

When students log on to the learning platform that hosts the FL units, they can choose units from a large menu that looks like a spider web (Figure 2).

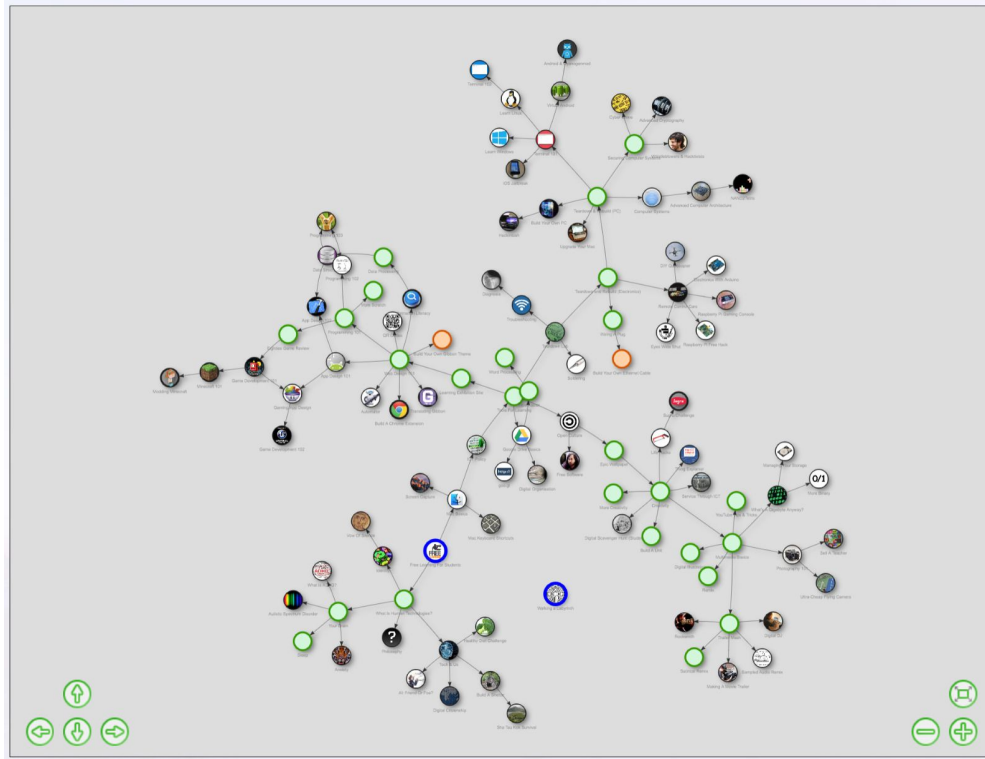


Figure 2. Visual of the Free Learning Map of one student.

Source: <https://gibbon.ichk.edu.hk/>

This spider web of units - and thus the curriculum content of a subject - is not static, but can grow infinitely across disciplines. Certain units have to be completed and the submitted work (upon completion of each unit) approved by the teacher in order to get access to the next set of units. Yet, there are no requirements of a minimum number or specific set of units that need to be completed and multiple units can be worked on simultaneously. This means that students work at their own pace, choosing their own learning pathway. The submitted work is considered as a formative assessment, with an extensive feedback process: the teacher must approve the submitted work by giving descriptive non-numeric feedback, asking for additions

or elaborations when the submitted work is incomplete and/or of poor quality, before a unit is considered as completed. In addition, teacher and student will engage in face-to-face discussions about their work. This type of assessment structure is an illustration of the work of Black and Wiliam (1998) on assessment for learning and student-centred feedback. Moreover, teachers can check the progress of students on the platform: how many units have been completed, how many units the student is currently enrolled in, how much time is spent on each unit.

Since the launch in August 2015 and at the time of writing this article, 463 students have been enrolled in 4034 FL units of which 2416 units have been successfully completed. Five teachers were actively teaching FL courses in August 2018, at the start of the research project.

### **3.2. Positioning Free Learning as a curriculum approach**

As FL is a novel school-based curriculum approach, it is important to briefly situate FL within the field of curriculum theory.

First, the FL curriculum approach is about self-exploration (Roseboro, 2008), whilst navigating through the FL units, but also through conversations with the teacher, the latter representing the relational aspect of FL. As will become apparent in the data analysis, the FL teacher is engaged in self-exploration as well. Second, FL can be considered an example of what Ted Aoki called a 'lived curriculum' (Aoki, 1983). Aoki, a phenomenological curriculum theorist, was concerned with the importance of immediate experiences instead of distant outcomes of

curriculum, of which Ralph Tyler's curriculum rationale of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is an example. Tyler's approach is usually viewed as a performance-driven model of economic instrumentalism in which students are being prepared to become productive members of society. The Tyler curricular approach is subject-based and follows a strong classification (Bernstein, 1996). Reactions against this model flared up in the 1960s, with Aoki being one of the critics of the model.

For Aoki, the 'lived curriculum' is the multiplicity (Aoki, 1993) of stories, actions, feelings and everything that comes with putting students together with (a) teacher(s). Curriculum is dynamic and is a combination of planned and unplanned actions; it is constantly changing, in a state of flux, as it is crafted and lived by human beings. For Aoki, this meant that teaching and learning are an ongoing process of negotiation and reflection between teacher and student, strongly emphasizing the relational aspect of teaching and learning:

Teachers and students can be seen as co-actors acting with and on Curriculum X, as they dialectically shape the reality of the classroom experiences embedded in a crucible of the classroom culture of which they are a part and in which they have inserted themselves (Aoki, 1983, p. 121).

In other words, the FL teachers and students are negotiating, reflecting and acting with and on the curriculum together, they are 'in it together', as the title of this report suggests.



Aoki also adds that a lived curriculum is reflective and explorative in nature, which links his curricular concept to Roseboro's (2008) idea of 'self-exploration', and will lead to a transformation of the self, a 'becoming'. The latter is also reflected in the 5+1 Model as well as in the school's mission, where teachers support students in their journey of 'becoming'.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

As stated above, FL as a curriculum approach is interpreted as an example of a lived curriculum, whereby the emphasis lies on the reciprocal and reflective actions and relationships between teacher and student and more broadly, education. Yet, to understand and rigorously analyse FL and its effect on the role of the teacher and student learning, we constructed a theoretical framework as well as a coding framework, the latter intertwined with the former. More details about the coding framework will be presented under the data and methods section (see section 5).

Given the emphases of the 5+1 Model, the way FL is conceptualised and implemented, and ICHK's general views on education, we turn to Gert Biesta, in particular his work on the purposes of education: he argues for education to have three interrelated purposes that should be at the heart of learning and teaching: qualification, socialization and subjectification (Biesta, 2008, 2017). These three purposes are not separate mechanisms, but work simultaneously and are overlapping.

Qualification refers to schools equipping students with general and/or specific skills and knowledge, preparing them with the appropriate qualifications for future jobs and roles in society. This purpose is considered the most obvious one a school should concern itself with. Socialisation 'has to do with the many ways in which, through education, we become members of and part of particular social, cultural and political 'orders' '(Biesta, 2008, p. 40). There are a number of values implicitly and explicitly transferred through education, which enable students to become 'members' of certain social circles and build relationships. The third and last purpose is subjectification. It is for the teacher, and by extension the school, to provide a place and time for students to ask their own questions and to come to understand what the world is asking of them. For students to become responsible citizens in an uncertain world, it is crucial that they develop a sense of responsibility towards themselves and others, to develop strong personal ethics and self-mastery, obtaining a kind of freedom 'we encounter when we try to exist in and with the world and not just with ourselves' (Biesta, 2017, p. 31).

In addition, we draw, albeit only briefly, on Foucault's technologies of the self (Foucault, 1982) whereby he does not apply an instrumental interpretation of technologies, but sees 'technologies of the self' as

... operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being that people make either by themselves or with the help of others, in order to transform themselves to reach a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Besley and Peters, 2017, p. 58).

We consider Foucault's technologies of the self as a toolkit that is required in the ongoing exercise of self-mastery, of becoming a responsible human being, which lies at the heart of Biesta's interpretation of the different purposes of education.

## **5. Data and methods**

### **5.1. Data collection**

Three types of qualitative data were collected: data from classroom observations; semi-structured student and teacher interview data (see section 9 with appendices); data collected from digital surveys completed by parents and students (see section 9 with appendices). Data were collected after having obtained consent from all participants as well as approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Education University of Hong Kong.

Over the course of five months, at the start of the school year, two different FL classrooms were observed at monthly intervals (five times two observations of 70 minute classes), one Year 7 FL ICT class, with all 21 students being new to FL (the 'newcomers') and one Year 11 FL Media Studies (IGCSE) class, with 20 senior students, most of whom were familiar with FL (the 'veterans'). Both classes were taught by the same teacher. We deliberately chose to observe two different age groups and students with varied FL backgrounds as these samples could provide more insight into the differences students of various ages encounter when dealing with FL, but also how students develop in their FL approaches as they gain more experience.

Moreover, observing the same FL teacher in two different settings allows for a comparison of his approaches to teaching in two different classes. These observational data were used to supplement and triangulate the interview data. For the same purpose, data were collected through parent questionnaires (sent via email) filled out by 18 parents. Although parents were not directly involved in FL, their opinions and perceptions about FL through the accounts and observations of their children served as another lens through which FL could be viewed. The parents were surveyed about how they perceive FL and whether they thought FL has an effect on their attitudes towards the learning of their child. Questions were of semi-open, open and scaled nature. In addition, classroom observations and one FL teacher interview that was conducted (face-to-face, recorded and transcribed verbatim) for a small-scale research project in early 2018, were also used for supplementation and triangulation purposes.

After two months of observations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with nine FL students (five Year 7 students and four Year 11 students). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each interview took about 20 minutes. In a similar fashion, four FL teachers were interviewed, two of which were new to teaching a course in FL (the 'novices') and two of which had a minimum one year of experience teaching FL and developing FL content (the 'experts'). These interviews generally took up to 45 minutes.

Last, 28 students (Year 7 to Year 11) responded to a questionnaire (sent via email) that surveyed them about their perception of FL as an approach, whether FL has an effect on their learning and how they see the role of the FL teacher in comparison to other teachers. Again,

questions were of a semi-open, open and scaled nature and analysed against the concept- and data-driven categories of the coding framework that is presented below.

## 5.2. Data analysis

For this case study, we applied a qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach (Schreier, 2012; Stemler, 2001, Thomann and Maggetti, 2017), as this approach allows for making meaning of qualitative data by applying a coding frame that consists of categories in which qualitative research materials can be classified (Schreier, 2012). QCA is systematic, flexible and reduces data (Schreier, 2012): it reviews all data, involves constant adjustments to coding frames, and eradicates data that do not fit the final coding frame. Data analysis of this study followed steps suggested by Schreier (2012) that start with building a coding frame, then moving on to dividing materials into units of codings, trying out the coding frame, evaluating and modifying the coding frame, conducting the main analysis, and finally presenting the findings.

The coding frame was initially based on ICHK's ATLs (see 2.2.) and the IB Standards and Practice<sup>5</sup> because both guide the design and implementation of FL. The list of IB Standards and Practices for all programmes (IB, 2014) is divided into three sections: philosophy, organisation and curriculum. As the focus of this study is to gain a thorough understanding of FL as a *curriculum* approach, only the section 'curriculum' (section C) was taken into consideration. This section has four subsections: collaborative planning, written curriculum, teaching and

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<sup>5</sup> The IB Standards and Practices (see Standards and Practices for all programmes pages 3- 6) can be consulted here:  
<https://www.ibo.org/globalassets/publications/become-an-ib-school/programme-standards-and-practices-en.pdf>

learning, assessment. Only the last two subsections will be looked at, because we investigated primarily FL as a curriculum approach and its effect on the role of the teacher and student learning. From the comprehensive list of practices under both subsections - ICHK's ATLs and the IB Standards and Practices - we identified major coding themes for each. The three major themes for 'teaching and learning' are 'attitudes to learning', 'catering for learner diversity' and 'different teaching strategies'. The two major themes identified for 'assessment' are 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment data to inform teaching practice'.

In the first phase, interview data were analysed manually. As more interview data were analysed, certain sub-categories emerged, and the initial two major categories of the coding frame, i.e. ICHK's ATLs and the IB Standards and Practices, became subordinate to a wider categorisation, constructed around the three purposes of education proposed by Biesta (2009, 2017), as introduced in section 4. We modified the coding frame accordingly, which is a combination of concept-driven and data-driven approaches (Schreier, 2012). The final coding framework has a hierarchical structure with Biesta's conceptualisation of the purposes of education (2009, 2017) as overarching themes. In addition, Foucault's technologies of the self are drawn on as 'tools'. Subordinate to the purposes of education are the IB Standards and Practices and ICHK's nine ATLs.

Initially the data were coded twice, and inconsistencies were discussed. Second, we reviewed all coded data and made final revisions. To ensure validity of the findings, deal with contradictions and generate a better understanding of and new insights into FL, findings

generated from interview data were triangulated with survey results and class observations. Specifically, we sought evidence and counter-evidence from the other sources.

This study, however, does not claim to be the ultimate account of FL nor is it considered as the only suitable approach to resist and transgress 'learnification' and performance-driven and outcomes-based trends in education. Our personal experiences as well as the nature of the information that students, parents and teachers decided to share, all play a role in the findings and perspectives of this project. As researchers, we thus acknowledge the importance of epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), whereby the researcher's social, academic and intellectualist bias (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) is inevitable. Such 'multiple realities' are expected in qualitative research (Stake, 2010).

## **6. Findings**

Findings about the effect of FL on the role of teachers and student learning are presented in two separate sections below.

### **6.1. The Effect of Free Learning on the Role of the Teacher**

#### **6.1.1. Subjectifying and socialising the students**

Major themes that emerged from the data analysis are that FL teachers are focusing a lot on 'subjectifying' and 'socialising' the students, to use Biesta's terminology. FL teachers, consciously and unconsciously, cultivate qualities in the students that help them discover who

they are and prime them for a life beyond school. Or, in other words, FL teachers support students in developing a toolkit of technologies of the self.

A first pertinent aspect central to FL, which became very apparent during the classroom observations, is the level of ownership students are given by their FL teacher. FL teachers allocate most of the class time to students working on FL while only a smaller portion of time is used for collective teaching. One teacher said:

*They can learn in the classroom, or somewhere else. I would not restrict them to a certain learning venue. But I need to know where they are.*

Students can spend their time on the units of their choice, using their preferred approach (collaborating, working alone, working outside of the classroom...). Results from the parent survey showed that parents generally recognised improved learning autonomy in students. For example, one parent described his/her child's changes as

*well-planned, increased confidence in the subject, increased interest in the subject, applied the knowledge learnt.*

Second, FL teachers perceive their role as being a guide, which was also apparent during the classroom observations. One teacher claimed:



*My role is really as a facilitator and assessor.*

The shift from 'teacher' to 'guide' appears to be challenging for some FL teachers, especially the novices. A prominent dilemma that they face is whether to intervene when students are off task. An intervention could possibly go against the intended approach of FL, where students have ownership of their learning and learn to manage their own learning process. During classroom observations, we noticed that the expert FL teacher did allow for a certain level of getting 'off track'. Teachers clearly have to reposition and change the way they view their teacher role and their relationship with the students. Results from the student survey showed that the teachers' approaches cultivated students' learning autonomy, as all Year 7 students and 12 out of 17 Year 11 students expected their teachers to be 'guides' rather than 'commanders'.

This teacher repositioning is also reflected in ICHK's 5+1 Model, particularly in the adult-to-adult approach as a core principle of one of the five pillars: Berne's Transactional Analysis. At ICHK and particularly in FL classes, the relationship between students and teachers is non-hierarchical and at times, students also take on a teacher role. For example: in some cases, students will develop a FL unit if they are an expert in a relevant topic. FL teachers thus learn not to insist on things that they think should be done, but leave that decision mostly to the student. However, the teacher does not become a 'peer at the rear', but still holds a certain authority, as witnessed in this research. One teacher shared:

*I am not trying to control things as much, I am not trying to steer things, but occasionally I still need to be the teacher, bring the volume down, do this, do that. Sometimes we have behavioural issues... I still need to be the teacher.*

Last, the subjectification and socialisation of students has to do with preparing them for life beyond the classroom and after graduation. FL teachers are aware that their responsibility is not just to support their students to aim high in terms of academic performance, but also to cultivate habits of mind that will benefit them in life in general and that will help the students in becoming responsible individuals in society. FL teachers emphasise the importance of developing an intrinsic motivation to learn and they want students to be responsible for their learning process. One teacher told his students:

*[You need to] learn what it takes for you to be a good student, because that's what's going to provide success for you when you leave the school.*

Other qualities deemed important for this purpose are 'attitude to challenge' and 'resilience', also stated explicitly in ICHK's ATLs. Students are allowed to 'fail and get it wrong' in FL and, with teachers' guidance, make revisions to their submitted work and resubmit as many times as needed. This approach cultivates a positive attitude towards difficulties and challenges. The FL teacher creates a safe environment where failure is considered a necessary and constructive part of the learning process. This view is also reflected in the following account, registered during a teacher interview:

*If I constantly, say, have full control and tell them what to do all the time until they leave school at 18, they do what you expect from them... our job from the age of 11 to 18 in school is to introduce opportunities to allow them to fail and get it wrong.*

### **6.1.2. Qualifying the students**

The analysis above illustrates that subjectification and qualification are important aims of FL, in line with ICHK's 5+1 Model as well as the school's mission, which states 'to educate *all* our students, unlock their potential and offer an experience that best prepares them for life beyond school' (2019). Yet, the FL approach also seeks to impart particular knowledge to students that will enable them to undertake action outside of the classroom, to apply the knowledge learnt in their daily life. In other words, FL also aims to qualify the students (Biesta, 2008, 2017).

The flexible structure and approach of FL as well as the variety in content of FL units, allows for the FL teacher to address diverse learning needs, thereby applying different teaching and learning strategies. During class observations, we witnessed that the FL teacher would go from one student to another, answering questions, checking in on students and personalising the level of support and guidance depending on individual needs.

Individualised student guidance is based on professional judgement of the teacher as well as relevant information received from the learning support department, in case students have specific needs. An important judgement teachers make, is how individual students learn and navigate through FL. This requires an understanding of how learning works, which is, again,

emphasised in the 5+1 Model through Vygotski's Zone of Proximal Development. FL teachers identify those who learn fairly easy through FL and those who have difficulties doing so. They gather this information from close observation, but also from the data the FL platform generates: how many FL units completed, time spent on a unit, the quality of submitted work etc. If a student goes smoothly through the FL course, the FL teacher allows him to explore independently and the teacher is less directive. Yet, the FL teacher would proactively reach out to a student who seems to struggle and would then provide more guidance and direction. One teacher shared the following thought:

*In some cases, as a teacher, you have to do very little to facilitate students because they are kind of naturally inquisitive and goal driven and these skills FL helps build. Whereas with other students you talk to, you know you have to give them lots of positive reinforcement...*

Additionally, assessment, ensuing feedback and revision are also important tools the FL teachers use to qualify students. Unlike more traditional assessments that would result in a grade, assessment in FL is used as a starting point for further discussion between teacher and student (assessment for learning). FL teachers comment on student work and make suggestions for further improvement, if deemed necessary. Students, in turn, respond and make extra efforts, with teachers' suggestions as references rather than instructions. This on-going 'conversation' allows for more and in-depth teacher-student communication, relieves pressure

as the assessment process is not grade-driven and helps students to improve their thinking and approaches to learning.

A challenge in qualifying the students through FL, as described above, is that the teachers' actions and responses are often based on personal judgement and impressions, which inevitably varies across individual teachers. Teachers mostly rely on their individual professional expertise to make decisions as to whom to help, what teaching strategy to use and which work needs improvement. When referring to assessment criteria, a teacher said:

*You know it's a bit arbitrary... I use my judgement as somebody who's been teaching for ten years ... [I can tell] how kind of focused and dedicated they've been.*

Another teacher used the words '*quite loose, quite open*'.

As numeric assessment rubrics go against the school-based educational approaches at ICHK and the FL approach in particular, other solutions, in negotiation with the FL teachers, could be discussed to address this challenge. One option could be to establish a stronger link between the FL unit assessments and ICHK's ATLs: every unit assessment could be connected to one or more relevant ATLs, which means that the FL teacher would evaluate the work against the progressive ATL scale, identifying where a student is in the development of the ATL specifically connected to a particular unit assessment. This mechanism could help streamline the FL assessment cycle. Additionally, and as a consequence of the former, with student work being specifically linked to the ATLs, it will help FL teachers to identify, at an individual as well as a

collective level, which ATL areas need more addressing. This way, student FL work can better inform teachers in what to emphasize and address more in their teaching. This practice will also help ICHK to align itself with the IB Standards and Practices concerned with ‘assessment data to inform teaching practice’.

To summarise, FL teaching addresses subjectification, qualification and socialisation. Students are given a significant level of independence to explore their interests and are approached by teachers on an adult-to-adult basis. While it is assumed that this approach helps to develop a toolkit of technologies of the self, which can yield lasting benefits, the ‘letting-go’ and ‘adult-to-adult’ approaches are challenging to some FL teachers, especially the novices. On the other hand, FL aims to impart knowledge to students, yet outside the framework of a traditionally planned, textbook based, static curriculum. It emphasises the negotiation between teacher and student, the latter being a characteristic of a ‘lived curriculum’. Hence, teachers are also involved in a process of reflection on their position as a teacher and negotiate knowledge with their students. In addition, the flexible approach and structure of FL enables individualised guidance during class sessions and the feedback-revision loop focuses on the learning process rather than the outcome.

## **6.2. The Effects of Free Learning on student learning**

This section focuses on students, examining how students respond to and perceive FL, with comparisons between Year 7 and Year 11 students, newcomers and veterans. As the two groups of students differ in age and level of FL experience, comparisons between them yielded

insights into the varying influences of FL on student learning. Two major themes emerged from interviews with students, including 'being subjectified and socialised' and 'being qualified', borrowing from Biesta's typology.

### **6.2.1. Being subjectified and socialised**

As has been argued previously, a major aim of FL is to 'subjectify' and 'socialise' the students.

This section discusses to what extent these aims are achieved from a student perspective.

Allowing students a certain level of ownership and independence means that they are responsible for their own learning. This is acknowledged by students across the two grades, as almost all of them repeatedly use the word 'self' in their descriptions.

The 'do-it-yourself' style of FL prompts the students to make decisions regarding learning on their own, rather than being instructed and directed by a teacher. Students develop a stronger sense of autonomy and independence because they own the learning process. The decisions are mainly about 'what to learn' and 'how to learn'; the latter could be further broken down into 'at what pace am I going to learn' and 'with whom am I going to learn'. The point is that the students experience, first hand, the consequences of their decisions and thus develop a stronger sense of responsibility. A Year 11 student stated:

*I used to procrastinate, even in class, but not anymore. I've been trying to tell myself, even when the teacher is not walking around that I should be on task and I should be*

*focusing on schools...I feel like you have to be more independent and have self- control to not procrastinate.*

Another Year 11 student referred to FL as having an influence on him beyond the classroom:

*It's not only effective learning but also a way to improve a student as a person and as productive members of a society, not just as a student, learner.*

While some students adapt to FL by proactively identifying problems with their learning and working out solutions, demonstrating agency and autonomy, others, especially the majority of Year 7 students and newcomers, are at times disoriented in the FL class. Some newcomers find it difficult to identify and follow a path themselves as they are mostly used to teacher instructions. A Year 7 student stated that :

*Sometimes you don't know what to do and the teachers are not available for you, and sometimes it's quite hard to stay focused because there's no one nagging you and keeping you... [FL is] hard for me because at some point you have to do all of them and I'm probably not good at some of them, they are challenging for me. [I prefer] traditional classes because it helps me stay focused. Just focus on one topic and not having to do many other units.... I would like someone to be there, just in case I'm not sure what to do or I'm not focused enough.*

These accounts are related to the Dweck's Growth Mindset pillar as part of ICHK's 5+1 Model.

Students acknowledge that in FL, a number of - at times challenging - decisions need to be



made, but they acknowledge that this is generally a constructive and progressive process of growth. Hence there is a significant difference in approach between Year 7 and Year 11 students, demonstrating a process of growth.

### **6.2.2. Being qualified**

The observations and data analysis point out that through FL, students are qualified mainly in terms of self-management and knowledge acquisition. The former is largely fostered by the flexible, 'do-it-yourself' FL approach. The latter is made possible through individualised learning, adult-to-adult relationships between student and teacher and the fact that students can choose their own FL pathway, in casu the units they wish to work on.

Self-management is a recurring theme in the analysis, in particular time management. While most interviewed students report on improvements in time management, they found this challenging, especially Year 7 students and newcomers:

*You kind of have an amount of time that it's said that you should be able to finish it in and if you don't, then it will tell you, you haven't and that kind of things is more difficult because you want to finish those as quick as you can, you will get under the mark or on the mark.*

Another aspect worth mentioning is 'focus'. As students decide on how to spend their learning time, some, especially Year 7 students, find that they are easily distracted:

*I just can't focus sometimes because I easily get distracted by other people of what they are doing and sometimes, the computer.*

Interviews with the students, especially Year 11 students, show that some identify distraction as an obstacle to learning and thus proactively work out ways to stay focused:

*You learn how to be effective through the whole learning experience. You have to think all the time in Free Learning.*

The other dimension of qualifying the students is to impart knowledge. Yet, contrary to more common teaching and learning approaches, the FL teacher does not 'teach' much during class sessions and the students mostly decide on their own learning process and progress. In addition, students generally report positive attitudes to and a preference for the feedback-revision loop over one-off numeric grades or final tests. A major reason for this is that the students, through this feedback process, learn how to improve their work and thus become motivated to do so, which are explicit traits of assessment for learning:

*I find those feedback very useful because I know what to work on and what I did well on, so it really gives me the encouragement to do better next time.*

Besides, students report that individualised feedback is really about them, whereas a grade merely represents the quality of that particular piece of submitted work:

*Grades are just one thing I can work on but it's not something about me. If I get feedback, I can work on what the feedback is.*

*You actually have a person marking your own work and giving their own personal opinions.*

The feedback-revision loop, as a result, is a form of individualised student-teacher communication which takes over from what would normally be 'teaching time'. Moreover, this process provides opportunities for teachers and students to get to know each other academically and personally and, again, to be engaged in a curriculum approach of situational praxis. The feedback-revision loop caters for a positive and reciprocal relationship between students and teachers, given the adult-to-adult approach:

*I feel like we are friends, not like teacher and student, like our relationship is not about teaching and just telling you what to do. It's like your friend.*

The close and non-hierarchical relationship renders the teachers approachable, which, in turn, facilitates student learning:

*If you have any questions about the work or anything, you can always ask him and he will always answer your question.*

Students who came from other schools highlighted this relational aspect:

*Teachers here are more like your friends [whereas in mainland China] you need to be very respectful to your teacher and anything you do, you need to put teachers in consideration.*

*We can actually talk to teachers like in Free Learning. In traditional schools, it's kind of hard to talk to the teacher I guess.*

In addition, this closer relationship between student and teacher makes it easier for the FL teacher to get a detailed picture of students' learning needs and thus to address these appropriately.

Overall, the findings - based on teacher as well as student accounts - illustrate that the flexible, 'do-it-yourself' approach of FL helps students in developing independence and a sense of responsibility by making learning-related decisions, managing their learning in and outside class, which is also explicitly reflected in ICHK's ATLs. While some students develop these abilities fairly easily through FL, some, especially Year 7 students and newcomers, find it more challenging and thus need more guidance from the teachers. Yet, given the set-up of FL, emphasizing the reciprocal relationship between student and teacher, needs can be identified and addressed appropriately. As for knowledge acquisition, individualised learning and teaching

on an adult-to-adult basis helps to develop a close relationship between students and teachers which renders teachers approachable and further facilitates learning.

## **7. Conclusion**

This case study of FL as a curriculum approach aimed at looking at an alternative for – or, an act of resistance against - the current trends of *learnification* and performance-driven and outcomes-based approaches in education, trends we problematised in the introduction of this report. We specifically looked at an example of a practice that puts an emphasis on the student-teacher relationship and that moves away from the aforementioned approaches. Moreover, through the case study we gained a better understanding of FL as a curriculum approach and how it is situated in ICHK's philosophy of education and its 5+1 Model through unpacking the why, what and how of FL, its strengths and challenges and, central to the research, the effect of FL on the role of the teacher and student learning. The case of ICHK, with FL as an illustration of a 'lived curriculum' that is rooted in the school's 5+1 Model, can serve as a meaningful alternative for the more prevalent approaches and trends mentioned.

The findings of the study indicate that FL is a curriculum approach that can be considered as an example of a lived curriculum with the reciprocal relationship between student and teacher as a cornerstone. FL is strong in the areas of subjectification and socialisation – two of the three purposes of education according to Biesta (2009, 2017) - of students as well as teachers, but also in the area of qualification, where knowledge, the understanding and application thereof, is subject to negotiation and the teacher is acting as a 'more knowing other', not an 'all knowing

other'. Alternatively, and different from the *learnification* trends, we could describe the role of the FL teacher as a re-considered role which is geared towards self-exploration and self-formation of students, preparing them to become thoughtful, reflective and responsible members of a society, willing to question their behaviour and get it wrong. FL also has its challenges when it comes to assessing students' work in a comprehensive, yet fair manner.

Based on the findings of this case study, there seems potential for further implementation and investigation of FL in different educational settings. The insights resulting from this study led to the adoption of FL in one course, part of an undergraduate international teacher training programme at the Education University of Hong Kong, since January 2019. Preliminary informal observations seem to be in line with the findings from the investigation at ICHK, and an expansion of FL to other courses is now considered. However, further investigation is necessary to have a more accurate view on how FL is 'operating' at higher education level. Additionally, it is worth investigating what the effect of FL is on pre-service teachers, not only when it comes to their own learning, but also when it comes to their perspectives on how curriculum can be approached in schools.

It is our hope that this case study can inspire educators as well as researchers to reconsider, challenge, resist and transgress some of the current educational discourses and practices.

(8090 words)

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## 9. Appendices

### 9.1. Appendix 1: Student interview questions

1/ What are the similarities and differences between FL and 'traditional' classes?

2/ Has Free Learning changed your approaches to learning (how you learn)? If yes, how?

3/ When it comes to learning something new, which type of class do you find more challenging: Free Learning or a traditional class? Explain your answer.

4/ What do you prefer: working alone or in a small group when doing Free Learning? Has your preference changed over time? Explain your answer.

5/ How has Free Learning changed you as a student in the class, or school? Or maybe even changed you as a person?

6/ The teacher gives you feedback every time you submit work at the end of a unit. You do not receive a grade, but ongoing feedback. How useful do you find this kind of assessment, compared to receiving a grade?

6a/ (Y11 only): The free learning teacher is giving you feedback, not grades, but then.. Your final IBDP / IGCSE exams are numeric. What do you think about this difference in approach?

7/ How would you describe your relationship with the Free Learning teacher? Is it different from your relationship with a teacher who teaches a traditional class? (To what extent is the role of the FL teacher different?)

## 9.2. Appendix 2: Teacher interview questions

### 1/ General questions:

- How would you describe the Free Learning approach?
- How would you compare it to more traditional approaches?
- What kind of "institutional criteria" (conditions and practices) at ICHK made Free Learning possible?
- What are the enabling and inhibiting factors at ICHK?
- How would you describe the "relationship" (or: connections) between Free Learning and the school's 5+1 pastoral model / educational philosophy?
- Do you see a direct link between FL and the IB?

### 2/ Teaching-related questions:

- How would you describe your role as a teacher in a Free Learning class?
- To what extent has your role as a teacher changed (compared to traditional classes)?  
Not at all - a bit - a fair bit - a lot - drastically
- What do you consider the biggest challenge(s) for you as a teacher in a Free learning class?
- How would you describe the "ideal" Free Learning teacher? Name three "traits".
- Have you developed any FL content? If yes, give some examples of units you have developed.

- Did you encounter any challenges when developing content? If yes, what kind of challenges?

### 3/ Student-related questions (learning):

- In what way are classroom dynamics different in a FL class compared to a more traditional class?
- In what way do students approach their learning in FL differently, compared to traditional classes?
- Do you generally see a change in students' attitudes towards learning as they gain more experience in / exposure to Free Learning? Please elaborate.

A lot of change - considerable change - some change - no change

- Does FL cater more for collaborative learning or individual learning?
- To what extent is FL suitable for a wide range of student profiles?  
Suitable for everyone - suitable for most students - suitable for some students - suitable for few students
- What would be the ideal age range of students taking FL classes?

### 4/ Assessment:

- How would you describe the assessment method of Free Learning units?
- How do you assess whether or not students have gained insight / have mastered the content of a Free Learning unit?
- What kind of evidence of learning is suitable in FL?

- Which aspects do you take into consideration when assessing a student (list in order of importance)?

Classroom behavior / attitude

Submitted learning evidence

Student comments upon submission of learning evidence

5/ General advice:

- How applicable do you think FL is to different subjects? Elaborate on your answer.

Very applicable - reasonably applicable - not very applicable - not applicable at all

- How applicable do you think FL is in other settings: primary, secondary or tertiary education? Elaborate on your answer.

Very applicable - reasonably applicable - not very applicable - not applicable at all

- What kind of training would you recommend for a FL teacher?

### **9.3. Appendix 3: Student survey questions**

The student survey questions can be accessed [here](#).

### **9.4. Appendix 4: Parent survey questions**

The parent survey questions can be accessed [here](#).