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Earth's future, in your pens

An experiential learning programme is challenging students to be more thoughtful about how buying things they don't need adds to the city's problem of waste, writes **Kelly Fung**

When 11-year-old Yuen Tsz-yau first purchased cheap stationery to fill her pencil case, she never thought that she would end up repairing ball pens that are usually only HK\$5 each at most shops. Earlier this month, she went on a treasure hunt at home - not to look for hidden prizes, but to find broken items that could be repaired. Doing so, she realised she had so many ball pens that she had forgotten about, some of which were broken. "Instead of throwing the pens that don't work to the bin, I thought I could try to fix [them] first," she said. The Primary Six pupil from the Dr Catherine F. Woo Memorial School in Sha Tin went on this treasure hunt as part of a programme called ECF

(Environment and Conservation Fund) Earth 2038's Learning Journey of Sustainable Consumption, organised by the Consumer Council. Last week, the Council released a study that examined changes in the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of Hongkongers toward sustainable consumption over the past five years. It found that overconsumption has increased during the Covid-19 pandemic because more people are shopping online, where it is easier to buy what they don't need. And goods purchased online are often delivered in wasteful plastic packaging.

With this experiential learning programme, the Consumer Council hopes to challenge students to reflect on what they buy and how they can make Hong Kong - and the world - a more sustainable place to live. About 3,700 students from 30 different primary schools have taken part in these activities. Tang Ka-tung, 30, panel head of General Studies at Tsz-yau's school, is the teacher in charge of the school's sustainability programme. "Many young children do not value what they have in their lives," said Tang.

"Instead of throwing the pens that don't work into the bin right away, I thought maybe I could try to fix them first," Tsz-yau said

That changed with this sustainability campaign. When he showed students a video of how plastic in the ocean threatens the lives of sea turtles, he witnessed a moment of impact in his classroom. "[Students] began wondering where the plastic came from, and where they were going," he said. As part of the Consumer Council's programme, students were given a kit with a booklet that challenged them to learn about sustainability by taking part in six activities under the themes Rest, Survival, Future, Discovery, Dreams and Life. For example, Tsz-yau's treasure hunt that led to fixing her broken pens was for an activity in the Rest category, which encouraged pupils to look for items that had been "resting" at home, in their book bags and even in their pencil cases. They were then asked to count the unnecessary items they owned. Through this activity, organisers

wanted participants to think twice before buying something new. After completing all the campaign activities, Tsz-yau felt she needed to value everything she owned, which led her to fix her broken blue pens instead of just tossing them away. "I saw her study the pens' structure, even the metal spring inside, as she tried to put them back together," said Tsz-yau's mother, who has noticed changes in Tsz-yau's consumption behaviours. She has even been going around the house to find clutter that could be used again, even uncovering unused AA batteries in a cabinet. She has also influenced her family to go as far as baking their own bread instead of eating one that is store-bought, which they don't like because of its excessive plastic packaging. "If we decide to make a change and live more sustainably, we can all continue to live in this world together," Tsz-yau said.



The Yuen family is now committed to living more sustainably. Photo: SCMP