

Challenges to Teaching Citizenship Education in Hong Kong after the Handover

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review the school system in Hong Kong and its practices in relation to citizenship education, especially in the period after the handover. With the transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from the UK to China, the role of education in times of socio-political transition has been an important political issue and concern for educators and researchers. Under the framework of "One country two systems", Hong Kong needs to foster the development of indigenous political leaders and the handover created a favourable atmosphere for the growth of citizenship education. In this paper, however, it is argued that whether schools can be the nursery of leadership and the exponent of balanced citizenship education in Hong Kong is in doubt when seen in the context of a substantial expansion in national education, limitations at the institutional and organizational levels and the lack of awareness on the part of teachers and students.

Citizenship education has been extensively researched in many countries (Torney-Purta, Schwill, & Amadeo, 1999). It is now possible to identify a consensus that citizenship education can be used as a vehicle for social change and as a way of preventing certain social problems (Pinson, 2007; Pearce & Hallgarten, 2000). However, the notion of citizenship is still a contested, multifaceted and complex concept, which embodies diverse meanings in different societies and eras (McLaughlin, 1992). It carries tensions between different identities and can be both exclusive and inclusive. The process of determining who is a citizen and who is not involves mechanisms of exclusion that define who is "in" and who is "out". In Hong Kong, the questioning of the importance of "in" changed with the redefined national borders in a global age. Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan capitalistic city, and the interaction of globalization and localization is further complicated by the factor of nationalization. Hong Kong has never been a nation-state or a democratic polity. Citizenship education thus displayed distinctive features which differed from a conventional unitary model of national citizenship, such as the model that can be seen in China. The transfer of sovereignty had led to a change in the nature of citizenship and consequently cast doubt on the whole nature of citizenship education.

The Development of Citizenship Education in Hong Kong

Citizenship education has become a contentious topic as soon as the transfer of sovereignty was agreed in 1984 by the Joint Declaration of the British and Chinese Governments. Debates and discussion continued at all levels in society, and the course of discussions were strongly influenced by a number of political events. For instance, in response to the "June 4 massacre" in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, amendments to the Education Ordinance and Education Regulations were made, which allowed for the dissemination of unbiased information and teaching of a political nature in schools (Leung, 2008). The *Guidelines on Civic Education in School* (DCC, 1996) published in 1996 also emphasized human rights education, education for democracy, education for the rule of law, national education, global education and education for critical thinking (Leung, Chai & Ng, 2000). Nevertheless, there were requests from local people and pro-China officials in Hong Kong pressing for more national education. A number of research studies revealed that the knowledge of Hong Kong pupils about China was very limited, "civic attitudes"

towards China were low and the sense of being a citizen of Hong Kong was much stronger than the sense of being Chinese (Lau, 1997; Wong & Shum, 1996; CDC, 1995).

The New Focus for Citizenship Education: Nationalistic Education

The promotion of national education has become a central element in curriculum development since 1997. Soon after 1997, government circulars were issued to remind schools to raise the national flag on significant occasions and to use national symbols (Lee, 2008). The first Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, highlighted national education and patriotism to develop a nation identity and called on the community to work together to foster patriotic Chinese citizens. A set of new curricular guidelines replaced the 1996 version, with the express purpose of helping children and teenagers become "good citizens", shouldering duties and obligations of the individual to society, having virtues associated with traditional Chinese culture and values, and having a strong attachment to ethno-cultural nationalism (Morris, Kan & Morris, 2000; Tse, 2007). In 1998, the Curriculum Development Institute established a working group examining China-related elements in the curriculum and completed a report, *China Elements in the School Curriculum: Curriculum Examination Report* (CDC, 1998) suggested an increase in China elements in subject contents. A National Education Center was also established under the management of a pro-China education body, the Federation of Education Workers, in 2004.

Teachers and students are sponsored to visit the mainland through exchange programmes in order to gain a better understanding of the current development of China and to develop a sense of national identity through personal experience. In 2004, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB, later renamed EDB, the Education Bureau) launched a national education programme as part of the youth leadership award scheme, arranging for one hundred and seventy student leaders to enrol in an 11-day programme in Beijing (Lee, 2008). Teachers, school middle managers and principals have also been invited to subsidized training programmes co-organised by local universities and mainland universities every year in the last decade (Lee, 2008). According to the Policy Address 2008 (HKSARG, 2008), the government has injected additional resources to provide more extensive mainland exchange opportunities for pupils, including upper primary and junior secondary students. The "Tonggen Tongxin" (same root, same heart) programme, first introduced in 2008-9 by the EDB, is specially organized for upper primary and junior secondary students. In the school year of 2010-2011, the said programme provides 16 itineraries with designated themes accommodating 27,000 places for participating local teachers and students. In addition, a consultation paper on the Moral and National Education Curriculum (EDB, 2011) was released early this year suggesting Hong Kong students to receive further political socialization in the primary and secondary school, with national education as an independent subject.

News about the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, Chinese Olympic medalists and the mainland's successful completion of space missions and outstanding Chinese scientists have been used to boost nationalist education in schools. The advocacy of the national education has been backed by the provision of teaching kits, and guidelines on patriotic rituals from the EDB and the National Education Center. With huge resources injected into schools, communities and media to promote nationalistic education, citizenship education become unbalanced, and other elements, such as human rights education, education for democracy and education for social justice, have been squeezed out from the mainstream curriculum (Leung, 2008; Tse, 2007).

The Challenges and Difficulties of Teaching Citizenship Education

Academics have expressed concerns and criticisms (Lee, 2008; Lee & Sweeting, 2001; Leung & Pring, 2002; Leung, 2007) noting a danger of indoctrination by parochial nationalistic propaganda as citizenship education (termed ideological-political education) in mainland China explicitly implants state-supported ideologies into the pupils (Chen & Reid, 2002). Efforts to resist are made by a number of NGOs to

balance the monopoly over the interpretation of patriotism and the promotion of alternative identities based on universal principles, such as human rights, social justice and democracy (Leung, 2003). It may be too early to determine the impact and fate of this national education initiative, but the critical tensions are already apparent. It is to be noted here that whether schools can form the basis of balanced citizenship education in the future of Hong Kong is in doubt when seen in the context of limitations at the institutional and organizational levels and the lack of awareness of school leaders, teachers and students.

Limitations at the institutional and organizational levels

Although there are many dedicated, caring and professional teachers in schools in Hong Kong, there has been no agency that serves to represent teachers professionally. There are two significant bodies that represent the interests of teachers in Hong Kong, but both are unions that have been strongly aligned with political parties. The Professional Teachers' Union (PTU) was a major source of opposition to the government and the Federation of Education Workers is aligned with pro-PRC and pro-government groupings. The highly politicized government-teacher relationship does not motivate the government to raise the status of the occupation of teacher, nor to promote the characteristics associated with a strong degree of professionalization. The government feels justified in its role in monitoring and evaluating teachers directly.

As there is no agency to serve as the professional representative of teachers, the view that individual teachers and schools are primarily responsible for the level of professionalism is in marked contrast to the absence of any recognition of the responsibilities of the government. In the end, these conditions create a scenario where teachers are often portrayed as the key source of various education problems in the public eye (Morris, 2004). Many long standing features of the system, such as its exam-oriented nature, the undesirable features of pedagogy, perceived declining language proficiency among pupils and the problems encountered in implementing the curriculum reform, have been considered to be the direct fault of teachers or the schools (Morris, 2004).

During this period of declining demand for teachers, due to changes in demographics, there are suspicions that any disagreements with the government guidelines and agenda will be used to make decisions about promotions, contract renewals and redundancies, and worst of all, the closure of schools. With wave after wave of public criticism, pressure to implement educational reforms and emphasis on training more teachers, many schools and individual teachers do not have the resources and the energy to exercise their autonomy in relation to issues such as the shifting definition of "citizenship" and "citizenship education" or to design alternative curricula and teaching kits to diversify the interpretation of national identity in their daily teaching lives.

Lack of awareness of political values

In practice, not every teacher has the knowledge and skills to be sensitive to political values and the political function of education. Law and Ho (2004; cited in Ho, 2007) mention that not more than 5% of Hong Kong teachers understood issues concerning the political authority and legitimacy of China to produce "apolitical and anational" education during the colonial era. Leung and Print (2002) also point out that only half of a sample of 49 secondary school teachers presented nationalistic education as the core of civic education, and education for cultural nationalism was singled out as the topic they regarded as most important. Fok (1997) and Law & Ho (2004) suggest that the reasons why teachers feel uncomfortable about teaching political or civic education may include their lack of resources and teaching materials, their insensitivity to politics and their not having been taught how to teach this topic.

Hong Kong students are also described as apathetic and passive in many previous research studies. In 1994, a survey of primary school pupils conducted by the Curriculum Development Council showed that

they possessed "inadequate" attitudes, political knowledge and values (cited in Cheung & Leung, 1998, p. 51). Wong and Shum's (1996) survey revealed that out of 1,660 15-24 year old young people, most could not answer questions related to the civic and political aspects of Hong Kong society.

Conclusion

As shown above, the mission of balanced citizenship education in fostering an informed citizenry in the modern sense is constrained by the nationalization of the curriculum and educational practices, the shortage of proper professional agency and the pressure to limit the exercise of teacher autonomy. Educational practice is increasingly coupled with political and economic considerations rather than ethical concerns. In the end, I suggest that the balance between the cognitive and affective missions of national education is vital to the cultivation of balanced citizens. With limited resources and in the absence of strong support from the government, the preparation of civic educators should, as a minimum, adopt an appropriate mix of teaching approaches, such as problem-based learning, self-motivated learning and civic participatory approaches. In this way, citizenship education could contribute to the development of open-minded national education for cosmopolitan and liberal cities like Hong Kong.

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