ON BECOMING AN ACTIVE AND PARTICIPATORY CITIZEN: A STUDY ON EDUCATION AND POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION IN HONG KONG

SHUN WING NG

Introduction and aims of the study

In many countries, the curriculum of social studies and civic education have been criticized for their limited contribution to the development of informed, critical and engaged citizens. It also argued that often these courses do not contribute to nurture democratic attitudes, values and practices among adolescents. This is partly due to textbooks’ avoidance of public issues and social problems, inattention to skills of critical thinking and inquiry, and unrealistic portrayal of political and civic life whereas teachers seemed to discourage critical inquiry about political behaviours. (Patrick 1967, 2002).

Education is inseparable from and shaped by its social and political context. Hong Kong is of no exception. In the era of colonial rule, citizenship education in Hong Kong was characterized by depoliticisation. The British government did not allow teachers to do any form of political teaching in schools, and there was a lack of any democratic values and critical thinking skills in the content of civic education or social studies curriculum (Lee 1996, Leung and Ng 2004, Yuen and Byram 2007). Tse (1998) argues that the governmental policy of depoliticisation led to the poverty of political education, which bred a politically alienated younger generation in the colonial times. Similar to the colonial government, the re-depoliticising of citizenship education is of paramount importance in the post-1997 Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), which has rendered relatively strong civil and social rights, but weak political rights to the Hong Kong people (Fairbrother 2005). In contemporary civic education in Hong Kong, the intention of developing students with the ideology of participatory democracy and active citizenship has been minimised, and since the 2001 curriculum reform
patriotic and national education has been placed as a top priority (Leung and Ng 2004). Though the 1997 Civic Education Guidelines are embedded with many political elements such as democratic values, civic participation, and political rights and responsibilities in its contents, Ng’s (2000) study indicated that many teachers selected cultural dimensions but avoided teaching political dimensions in the civic education curriculum. Likewise, Lee (2003) reported that political content was not well addressed and there was little formal teaching about democracy in the classroom. As a result, Hong Kong students have been trained to be politically apathetic.

Interestingly, a few secondary students took initiatives to participate in the mass demonstrations that rocked Hong Kong on 1st July in 2003 and 2004. Their active participation appeared to take many people by surprise. Since then, there have been many secondary and tertiary students participating in demonstration on 1st July and in the candle night of remembering the victims in the Tiananmen Square Incident on 4th June every year. Some youth organizations such as Democratic Tutorial Group and Youth Round Table have been established to play a political role in the Hong Kong society. Although these students are a minority among Hong Kong youngsters, they, in fact, are particular samples of active and participatory citizens who are already well equipped with the quality of democratic citizenship.

In this regard, it is natural that many questions arise. For instance, how do these groups of young people become active participants in political events? In what way do they construct the conception of active and participatory citizenship? Which socializing agents play a significant part in the process of transforming them to become socially and politically active? What are the characteristics of formation of the attitudes towards civic responsibility and identity in the socialization process?

The aim of this study was precisely to find out how young people become active and participatory citizens in an apolitical educational context like to one of Hong Kong. To contextualize the above-mentioned questions and the significance of education for democracy in Hong Kong, there is a need to refer to literature and previous research findings on participatory citizenship, and to the characteristics of the political socialization process, the essence of which is interwoven with the research findings and discussions.

Research Method
In this study, I employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1996) where the theoretical propositions follow, instead of preceding and predetermining, data analysis. Eighteen students from two secondary schools, as well as two civic education teachers were invited to three focus group interviews and individual in-depth interviews respectively in 2006 according to the procedures of purposive sampling suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 201). The two teachers, Lai King from Kowloon School and Ping Man from Triangle School, who were devoted to promoting civic education in their schools, were referred by a non-government organization (NGO). The names of both the schools and the teachers were pseudonyms. The secondary student informants were identified because they were recommended by their civic education teachers and were actively participating in social or political activities inside and outside the school. Both teachers and students were interviewed to ensure triangulation.

Each focus group interview was composed of six students. The first focus group consisted of six Forms 2 and 3 students in Kowloon School. The samples of the second focus group were Form 4 students of the same school. The third focus group was composed of two Form 6 students, two studying in Form 5 and two from Form 7 of Triangle School. The interviews were tape-recorded and the transcribed data were analyzed using both open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I adopted the constant comparative method in which each transcript of interview was compared with another, one incident with another incident, one category with another category so as to look for emerging patterns.

Findings and discussion

1) The personal beliefs of the civic education teachers.

As socialization agents, teachers are in a privileged position to promote education for democratic citizenship. They can encourage students to select the community issues to investigate, and when this happens students are more likely to achieve a higher level of civic development. Good education is democratic. Indeed, political and civic knowledge, intellectual skills, participation skills and political attitudes are core components of political socialization in responsible citizenship and a democratic society (Terren 2002; Patrick 2002).
To understand how the students in this study became active participants in social events and developed a sense of social concern and civic-mindedness, it is important to know more about the personal philosophy and background of the two teachers. Generally speaking, Lai King and Ping Man had a similar background where they were appointed as responsible for implementing civic education in the school. They were both Christians and had studied Sociology at the university. Lai King had a deep belief in social justice and promised herself to do her utmost to help those who are exploited and under-privileged.

Ping Man graduated with Chinese as his major and a Sociology minor 12 years ago. He reports that his greatest influence was the experience he gained when he was committed to the editorial work of the University Student News Group, recognised as an organization caring for those being socially deprived and suppressed. He believed that being critical was the basic skill to protect oneself in the society. Ping Man said:

The under-privileged should be critical, particularly towards those in power in the society in order to secure their benefits and welfare from being deprived. (Teacher informant, Triangle School)

With the consent of their headmasters, they organized seminars and exhibitions on the issue of the Tiananmen Incident each year for students and teachers to explore the meaning of citizenship and patriotism. Lai King alluded to the mission that civic education teachers have to pursue for social justice through developing a personalized sense of social concern. She said:

To build up a sense of social justice, we have to experience what the real situation of the society is and to avoid just listening to what the mass media has described. (Teacher informant, Kowloon School)

To strengthen the capacity of social awareness of her students, Lai King had established a student body entitling ‘Street Group’ under the regime of the Civic Education Society in her school. She had brought her students to observe the election activities for the Legislative Council, to interview a candidate for the office of Legislative council, and to learn the meaning of poverty by touring the poor district. Lai King expected their students to have chances for social exposure so as to enhance their civic commitment and social consciousness.
As a citizen embedded with social consciousness, the student should not just receive but need to try to organize what they see and learn and promote them with the civic courage. (Teacher informant, Kowloon School)

As for the conception of citizenship, both, especially Ping Man, found that the notion of citizenship should be participatory in action and supranational in nature. Ping Man explained in this way:

The occurrence of the Tiananmen Incident reminds me that the value beyond patriotism towards global citizenship is of paramount importance (Teacher informant, Triangle School)

Both Lai King and Ping Man were critical teachers. This finding is corresponding to that of the study of Yuen and Byram (2007) in which civic educators in Hong Kong favored citizenship education of a cosmopolitan and global nature and teachers of Government and Public Administration behaved critically in the teaching of national identity in schools. In addition, their religion seemed to render them a certain type of spiritual support for realizing the mission of teaching and participating for social justice.

I am nurtured in the spirit of Jesus Christ who leads us to look at things with a global horizon. (Teacher informant, Triangle School)

Definitely, Christianity encourages creativity and critical thinking among mankind. (Teacher informant, Kowloon School)

Improving the educational environment through curriculum and teaching pedagogy is of paramount importance for the transformation process. Through participating in social service, students can explore social issues and develop themselves with a social role and identity (Flanagan and Gallay 1995, Hatcher and Bringle 1997, Yates and Youniss 1998). Lai King was keen on designing programmes of experiential learning for the members. Indeed, She had a plan for nurturing students’ civic development:

There are follow-up activities after street-going. The students are required to do a presentation of what they have observed.
and felt after the activities. (Teacher informant, Kowloon School)

Kurth-Schai and Green (2003) and Carpenter (2006) point out that democratic education requires continuing collaborative participation in processes of teaching and learning in citizenship education. In this regard, issue-based learning was one of the key teaching methods adopted by both Lai King and Ping Man. Ping Man expressed:

We talk about the story behind World Disneyland; we talk about human rights in Hong Kong. Civic education as a subject provides me with opportunities to enhance students’ discussion. (Teacher informant, Triangle School)

Hahn (1998) and Ross (1996) encourage teachers to employ issue-based teaching methods, through which students can consequently develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

2) Student constructions of active and participatory citizenship.

Kennedy (2007) argues that there is no agreement about the meaning of active citizenship. Definitions of citizenship are very context-dependent (Benn 2000). As echoed by Kerr, Nelson, and Ireland (2006), many challenges remain in terms of what ‘active citizenship’ means and its implications for policy and practice. In fact, student informants demonstrated diverse views on the conception of active citizenship but the majority thought that having a sense of social concern was of vital importance. One of the students commented:

As active citizens, we need to know more about our society by watching news. We have to voice out when there is injustice. We can write letters to complain. Or we can even express ourselves through petition, demonstrations and rallies. (Student informant 11, Form 7, Triangle School)

In fact, students at both lower and senior secondary levels had a more passive view on the notion of active citizenship.

We are passive citizens not because we are lazy but because we have no power under the age of 18. Are we too young to make decision and to vote? (Student informant, Form 2, Kowloon School)
However, a Form 4 student having participated in many social activities such as interviewing Korean farmers when the meeting of World Trade Organisation (WTO) was held in Hong Kong had defined citizenship in a substantive manner:

Regardless of whether it is political or not and anti-government or pro-government, I, as a citizen, will understand a social incident by exploration. I will exercise my rights to voice out. This is what I should do and what I choose to do. (Student informant 8, Form 4, Kowloon School)

DeJaeghere (2003) argues that active citizens should be involved in activities in various types of communities, from local school and community service groups to national political parties and organizations. This substantive conception of active and participatory citizenship was exemplified by two Form 7 students who had participated in demonstrations three times on 1st July. These students behaved with the quality of justice-oriented citizens or maximal citizens:

I am caring about what has happened every day in Hong Kong. As a citizen, I will do in accordance with my role in the society. (Student informant 14, Form 7, Triangle)

On the other hand, critical patriotism seems to be one of the requirements of an active citizen.

When we love our country, it is natural that we want to know more about our country. The more we love, the more we demand our country. (Student informant 5, Form 4, Kowloon School)

For one Form 3 student and two mature Form 7 students, they extended the conception of active citizenship to the perspective that it should be of global concern. Kiwan (2005) has identified that cosmopolitan citizenship is of importance in civic education. Two of the students expressed:

I participated as a volunteer in the WTO demonstration because I think the Korean farmers are being exploited. I need to care for those powerless in the world. (Student informant 15, Form 7, Triangle School)

To prevent the world from being polluted, we must do something in every
part of the world. What we have to do should be globally-oriented. (Student informant 11, Form 5, Triangle School)

In summary, the student informants were of different perceptions on the notion of active and participatory citizenship. Similar to the finding of the Civic Education Study across 28 countries sponsored by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (better known as IEA), some of the student informants confined active citizens as being committed to obligations rather than exercising their political rights (Kennedy 2007, Kennedy, Hahn and Lee 2008, Torney-Purta 2004). However, there were a significant number of students interpreting active citizenship as struggling for social justice for the powerless through participating in protest activities.

3) The emergence of civic awareness and responsibility in the process.

Transformation is a dynamic political socialization process by which young people learn the prevailing social norms and behaviour patterns of their culture as mediated through various social agencies (Hyman 1959, Patrick 2002, Sapiro 2004). Civic engagement of youth facilitates their civic development in which negotiating and interacting with socializing agents will help construct and reconstruct their political identity in specific cultural and social contexts. In fact, student informants recognised that they were growing up and gradually developed within themselves a sense of civic awareness. Two students echoed:

After going to the candle night, participating in the Poverty Camp and learning more about the WTO, I feel I have changed a lot. At least I have become more sensitive to social and political issues. (Student informant 16, Form 7, Triangle School)

In the past, I did not care what was happening around me. Now, in the Street Group, I have changed in terms of attitudes and knowledge acquiring. (Student informant 2, Form 2, Kowloon School)

Civic consciousness enhances political understandings. As the students know more by participation, a sense of civic mission will emerge. Many of the student informants said they became mature and confident. One of the students commented:
In the past, I didn’t know what the news was about. Now when I watch TV, I am more concerned with a certain extent of sensitivity. I have become confident in asking questions. (Student informant 9, Form 4, Kowloon School)

In fact, Lai King was satisfied that members of the Street Group became socially minded. However, some student informants were trapped in a dilemma of what they could do for the social justice as they were still studying in schools.

It seems that students at our age should not be involved in political activities. In fact, we can tell between right and wrong through participation. (Student informant 11, Form 4, Kowloon School)

Though the government does not pay attention to our views, we as students, will not get away from justice. (Student informant 15, Form 7, Triangle School)

In sum, political socialization is a dynamic process through which the youth interact with and respond to socializing factors and construct, refine and reconstruct the conception of citizenship in specific cultural, social and political contexts (Franagan and Gallay 1995). In this study, student informants constructed their social and political relationship with the context in which they engaged themselves (Yates and Youniss 1998).

4) The socializing agencies: Facilitating or restraining the transformation process.

As far as agencies for political socialization are concerned, Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo (1999) argue that the political value formation of individual students is influenced by five types of socializing agents: a) formal community such as political leaders, b) informal community such as workplaces and youth organizations, c) family, d) school factors such as teachers, intended curriculum, and participation opportunities, and e) peer groups in and out of class.

With reference to the data collected from informants, school, family, peer and church were the key agencies contributing to the process of political socialization of these students. School is indeed serving as a key socializing agency. Needless to say, the commitment of both Lai King and Ping Man demonstrated that teachers were of significant influence on the
students’ transformation process. One student said:

It is our teacher, Lai King, who has tried every of her effort to send us emails regularly so that we know the story behind WTO. She is actually our leader. (Student informant 7, Form 4, Kowloon School)

On the other hand, the student informants of Triangle School also found that their teacher, Ping Man, provided them with opportunities to know and explore more about social issues by organizing various types of civic education activities and employing permeation approach in conducting civic education and using issue-based learning activities in the classroom.

After entering this school and being taught in Ping Man’s lesson, I have been inspired and have become a member of the youth group of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Moment of China. (Student informant, Form 6, Triangle School)

However, the agents sometimes serve as a restraining force in the transformation process. In the study, it was discerned that some teachers would not be involved in organizing participatory activities due to heavy workload. Some even disliked the way that Lai King organized her students to go outside the classroom for experiential learning.

Some teachers do not support what we are doing now. They think that we are naughty. (Student informant 6, Form 3, Kowloon School)

Family is another socializing agency for students’ political development. Recent research reveals that youth-parent political discussion has a strong and broad influence on a range of youth civic outcomes (McIntosh, Hart and Youniss 2007). Lai King expressed that some parents did not allow their children to take part in non-academic activities. On the other hand, discussion on everyday social and political incidents between members of the family might account for youth civic development (Torney-Purta and Richardson 2004). One of the student responded in the following way:

It is my sister who is now studying in the university encourages me to pay attention to everyday happenings. She likes to talk
Nevertheless, parents may also cause some restraining effects on the transformation process. Two of the interviewees expressed that they had never had any discussion on social and political events with their parents either because they were politically apathetic or because they were educational incompetence.

My father never talks with me any political matters. He thinks that it is none of our business. He would rather let me stay home to do house chores than let me participate in a demonstration. (Student informant 17, Form 7, Triangle School)

Peer influence is another facilitating factor in the transformation process as highlighted by Flanagan and Gallay (1995). Cho, Gimpel, and Dyck (2006) argue that neighbourhood context has a socializing influence on participatory behaviours. This was especially prevalent in the dialogue among interviewees in the first focus group.

It is because of Sing, who has joined the Street Group. He told me there was much to learn in the group. Then I joined. (Student informant, Form 2, Kowloon School)

The influence of NGOs in the political socialisation process cannot be neglected. According to Lai King, the NGO of Alliance for Civic Organizations aiming at promoting civic education in secondary schools, had helped her design civic education curriculum and organize the simulation of election of Legislative Councilors.

As mentioned earlier, religion provided the two teachers with a certain extent of spiritual support in implementing political education. Nevertheless, the church might be a restraining force for political socialization. Two students concurred with each other that their church persuaded members not to participate in the 1st July Rally and not to be involved in the issue of homosexuality.

It is very strange. Some members of my Church do not agree to take part in the rally. They also assert that anything concerning homosexuality should be avoided, but I don’t care. (Student informant 8, Form 4, Kowloon School)
Undoubtedly, teachers in the school, parents in the family, classmates and friends in the peers are all key socializing agents in transforming youth to become active and participatory citizens. In addition, the influence of NGOs and church is of primary importance as well. All of these can be facilitating and impeding factors affecting the effectiveness of the transformation process.

Conclusions and Implications

Civic and citizenship education in Hong Kong has long been criticised by educators and researchers (e.g. Lee 1996, Tse 1998) as depoliticisation before and after the return of its sovereignty to China. This criticism is due to teachers’ avoidance of political aspects of the curriculum, as well as a lack of critical thinking and service learning skills in the curriculum (Ng 2000, Leung and Ng 2004).

This study has shown there are secondary school teachers who believe that studying civics should be done in a critical and analytical way. As exemplified in this study, the two civic education teachers are significant agents who have contributed to the socializing process of transforming their students to be active and participatory citizens. They have been devoted to implementing civic and citizenship education through providing students with opportunities for critical thinking and issue-based learning through service actions inside and outside the classroom. According to their discussion in this study, their religious beliefs, their sociological training at university, their working experience with the NGO and their global citizenship orientation are the hidden factors that contribute to their critical mindsets and deep beliefs in pursuing social justice through educating their students. These are seemingly necessary qualities of an effective socializing agent and catalyst to facilitate the transformation process (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo 1999).

An important theoretical contribution of this study is the socialization process where the notion of civic identity emerges within students themselves through civic engagement. Students unintentionally construct and reconstruct their civic identity by means of social actions such as visiting the poor, observing in the street and participating in demonstrations or political events. With the assistance of their teachers, students are probed to discuss, reflect, discuss and reflect. Through this process students gradually develop the passion of civic consciousness and civic responsibility. The notion of civic consciousness and civic identity is believed to be a key essence in transforming a person to be an active and
However, it should be noted from this study that effective transformation requires effective socializing agents. The samples, including both teachers and students, reported here were purposively chosen for interviews in order to explore and illuminate the process of how students are being socialized to actively participate in social and political activities. In fact, as discussed previously, not many teachers are consciously committed to designing issued-based learning activities in the classroom and experiential learning outside the classroom, either because of lack of space in the school time-table or because they are socially and politically conservative. As indicated in the interviews, some teachers did not support what Lai King had done in the Street Group. Many school principals do not allow their teachers to arrange participatory activities during school because the orientation toward examination is still dominant in the education system of Hong Kong. Therefore, agents in the school might become a restraining force in the process of participatory socialization.

Similar to the findings of McIntosh, Hart, and Youniss (2007), as pointed out in the interviews, families with members who always discuss social and political events with students will facilitate the student in acquiring political knowledge. It should be worth noting from this study that church and peer groups can also play either supportive or impeding roles in students’ political development. Religion can render support to teachers’ devotion to educating students about social justice, but conservative members of the church may prevent students from becoming socially and politically active.

The exploratory study reported here has yielded significant information about how students are socialized to become active and participatory citizens. There is no simple explanation for young people’s political socialization. There is something of a discourse in the literature about the differing effects of teacher, peer, parent and other community influences on the socialization process (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo 1999, Torney-Purta 2002, Biesta 2007). The theoretical assumption of Pettersson (2003) has demonstrated the complexity of political socialization in youth civic development.

We can conclude that civic education teachers play an important role in helping students become active citizens. Their personal beliefs and their devotion to implementing citizenship and democratic education two significant characteristics that seem to contribute to youth civic development. Students will gradually and unintentionally develop civic awareness and consciousness in the learning process facilitated by the
teachers. Most importantly, in addition to teachers, school principals, family members, peers and community stakeholders are also playing a supplementary but important role to help young people in constructing the notion of active citizenship in a more political way.

The study reported here is part of a larger research project that also includes in-depth interviews with NGO staff and members of the political youth bodies. The themes and data presented here are therefore part of a larger database and have been chosen insofar as they are related to specific issues of political socialization of secondary students. The fact that the sample was purposefully selected is a limitation. However, the findings of this study can help illuminate how a particular group of students become politically socialized in their process of personal development.

The findings reported here also have significant implications for the development of civic and citizenship education in Hong Kong. Education policy makers need to decide the purpose and focus of the civic education curriculum. In the near future, Hong Kong is going to witness very interesting and intense political debates as people decide when and how universal suffrage should be implemented according to the Basic Law, an important document signed between the Chinese and British governments in 1997, the year when Hong Kong returned to China. There may be a need, therefore, to train as many civic education teachers as possible who can help transform students to be socially and politically active members of the society in preparation for this and other debates about the future of Hong Kong society.

References


Dejaeghere, Joan. “A Conceptualization of Citizenship as Privilege and Power: Local, National and International Variations.” Pacific Asian
Fairbrother, Gregory P. “Power and Right in Hong Kong’s Citizenship Education.” Citizenship Studies 9, no. 3 (2005): 293-308.


