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Civic and Political Education

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Political forces shape school education, and school education serves political purposes. Recent socio-political changes have significantly influenced the shape of citizenship education worldwide. Hong Kong and Macao are anomalous and interesting cases in the development of citizenship education over the years of political transition. As colonies and then Special Administrative Regions (SARs), each place is neither a nation state nor a democratic polity. Citizenship education in these quasi city-states therefore displays certain features that distinguish it from conventional unitary models of national citizenship.

In congruence with the socio-political circumstances at large, citizenship education (commonly called ‘civic education’) in the colonial era was marginalised. For many years it was conformist and depoliticised. It alienated the students from their indigenous nationality and local politics, and portrayed the students as ‘residents’ or ‘subjects’ in a colonial setting rather than as ‘citizens’ in a sovereign nation state. During the 1980s and 1990s, decolonisation and national reintegration triggered new changes for school civic education, and resulted in the active involvement of the state and civil society in promoting civic education. However, unlike other former colonies heading towards independence by building new nation states, the experiences of Hong Kong and Macao were distinctive in being focused on reintegration with an existing nation state while maintaining a high degree of autonomy. Following the resumption of Chinese sovereignty, civic education has mainly aimed to build nationalism and patriotism, to strengthen the teaching of the Basic Law, and to promote the concept of ‘one country, two systems’.

The accelerated pace of globalisation has also brought an emphasis on global citizenship. Informed by theoretical discussion of the role of education in political socialisation and political development, this chapter analyses the civic and political education programmes in the two territories. It illustrates how education in transition mirrors a society in transition, and in turn affects the society. The chapter first gives an account of the continuity and change of political education in the period following World War II. It then contrasts and compares Hong Kong with Macao in terms of curriculum and path of development. The chapter also reviews practices and implementation of political education in the schools in the light of previous studies of civic education. Finally, it discusses the implications of these findings for theoretical reflection and for future civic education programmes in the two places.

Some Definitions of Citizenship and Political Education

The terms civic and political education carry denotative, descriptive and normative meanings. They are often used interchangeably with other terms including moral education, citizenship education, civics, political literacy, political indoctrination, and nationalistic education.

Conceptually, political education refers to “institutionalized forms of political knowledge acquisition which take place within formal and informal educational frameworks” (Ichilov 1994, p.4568). The content and orientation of political education varies from country to country, and from time to time, depending on the definitions of particular political systems. Political education could be about an obedient passive subject in a despotic monarchy, or an active participating citizen in a democracy. In nation states, which are the dominant political communities in the world, political education is commonly tied closely with citizenship. That is why political education is also commonly called civic education or citizenship education, particularly in the US.

‘Citizenship’ basically refers to the legal status of a full membership of a modern nation state and to the rights and obligations endowed (Marshall 1950, p.2). As entitlements, citizenship further consists of a set of institutions within which these rights and obligations are guaranteed and practised. The trajectory of citizenship development is not a natural, peaceful and universal evolutionary process, nor it is a one-way and irreversible trend of development. Citizenship developments are the outcomes of interplay among socio-political, cultural, ethnic and geopolitical forces. Grounded on the principles of equality and universality, citizenship movements reflect not only changes in political relationships between individuals and states but also a gradual transformation of both the state and civil society. Since the 16th century, citizenship has expanded over time and space, both in membership (including populations such as working class, women, minorities and immigrants) and in scope of entitlements (including civil, political, social and economic rights). In recent decades, it has been further expounded to include economic citizenship (or industrial rights), cultural citizenship, environmental citizenship, global citizenship, and corporate citizenship (Oliver & Heater 1994; Steenbergen 1994). In addition to a legal status and institutional contexts, citizenship provides the political member (citizen) with an identity, attachment and social bonding, which in turn requires loyalty to the community and civic consciousness or virtues on the part of the individual.

As citizenship is not a fixed or static concept, the concrete content of citizenship is constantly changing. The same is true of the content of citizenship education, which is multidimensional. As Heater (1990, p.314) points out, citizenship education is like a cube with three dimensions: elements (identity & loyalty, virtues, legal or civil status, and political entitlement & social rights); geography (local, nation state, region or world); and outcomes of education (knowledge, attitudes and skills). Since citizenship education embodies elements such as membership, entitlements, obligations, identity and virtues, this multidimensionality and complexity gives rise to a wide range of issues. The content of citizenship education generally includes knowledge, values, attitudes and group identifications necessary for a political community and its members. It therefore usually includes knowledge of the history and structure of political institutions at both national and local levels (sometimes even at global level), loyalty to the nation, positive attitudes toward political authority, fundamental socio-political beliefs and values, obedience to laws and social norms, sense of political efficacy, and interest and skills