
Delivering Civic Education in Hong Kong: why is it not an independent subject?

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ABSTRACT Internationally there have been serious efforts to identify effective modes of delivering civic education for preparing youth for the future challenges of citizenship. This article addresses the research question, ‘why is an independent subject not preferred in civic education by Hong Kong civic education teachers?’. It starts with a brief review of international debates and of the development of civic education policy in Hong Kong. Then it moves on to discuss why teachers tend to reject civic education as an independent subject based on the findings from an interview informed research study. The findings reveal that teachers’ misunderstandings of the nature of civic education are the major reasons. Treating civic education as comprising educational activities involving the nurturing of attitudes, values and skills of students with little content knowledge, the teachers consider that civic education is best accomplished through, for example, extra-curricular activities and not as a subject that demands time slots in the school timetable. It is argued that these misunderstandings will have negative impacts on the effectiveness of civic education, which is unfavourable to the nurturing of democratic cultures necessary for the development of the democratic system in Hong Kong and has to be rectified. Lastly, some recommendations for rectification that relate to civil society are discussed. Hopefully, this article can shed light on the understanding of the preferences towards the modes of implementation of front line practitioners in schools internationally, since this phenomenon is common in some other nations.

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, there is a growing concern that without active citizenship, which comprises both voting and active participation in civil society, democratic governance is fragile (Naval et al, 2002; Osler & Starkey, 2006). This observation leads to a renewed interest in civic education for democratic citizenship and human rights internationally (Davies, et al, 2001; Morris & Cogan, 2001; Torney-Purta et al, 2001; Eurydice, 2005; Osler & Starkey, 2006). However, regardless of the call for civic education, there are many debates around different aspects of civic education. One aspect of the debates is that although schools have long been considered influential political socialising agents, reports about the impact of formal civic education on democratic citizenship are mixed; some identified positive impacts, while others identified none (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Print et al, 2002).

Debates on the Implementation of Civic Education as a Compulsory Independent Subject

A debate that arises in relation to the effectiveness of civic education is whether there are more effective modes of implementation of civic education that could bring about stronger impacts on young people’s civic learning. Internationally there has been an interest in monitoring the delivery

modes of civic education curricula (Kerr 1999; Torney-Purta et al, 1999; Birzea et al, 2004). Policymakers and researchers alike have been concerned to identify the most effective forms of civic education for preparing young people for the future challenges of citizenship. There are debates both at the theoretical and empirical level. Theoretically, in arguing that schools are the guardians of democracy, Gould et al (2011) contested that treating civic education as a core interdisciplinary subject, alongside English, mathematics and science, is one of the six proven practices that constitute well-rounded and high-quality civic learning experiences. In criticising the Crick Report, Faulks (2006) argued that, if we are to teach citizenship seriously and effectively, we need to treat it as being as important as established subjects in the national curriculum. Hayward and Jerome (2010) disputed that citizenship could not flourish as a cross-curricular theme because its rich knowledge content demanded a specific discourse. Similarly, Whitty et al (1994) argued that it was very hard for any cross-curricular theme to succeed because pupils had little awareness of the theme as a distinct entity from the host subject and no distinctive teaching methods or recognition and realisation rules emerged. Moreover, if civic education is to be permeated into other subjects, for example, personal, social and health education (PSHE), it will lose its identity, and become invisible in the curriculum.

In contrast, on emphasising the actions, behaviour, values, dispositions and commitments orientation of civic education, Pike (2007) argued that an over-emphasis upon civic education as a school subject may have unwanted effects because such an approach can distract from the importance of learning values in action across the curriculum and through life experiences both inside and outside school. Though marrying civic education to PSHE to the extent that it loses its own identity may be problematic, divorcing civic education entirely from PSHE is not likely to help young learners see the relevance of citizenship to their personal lives. It is also argued that as civic education is very much concerned with values in action and fostering the motivation to combat injustice in society, the implied modes for teaching and learning may not sit easily with current pedagogical philosophies tied to content knowledge and the passing of examinations (Davies et al, 2005). It is also contested that assessment of civic education is difficult because citizenship can hardly be assessed in the same way as other curriculum subjects (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills [Ofsted], 2005, 2006; Kerr et al, 2007). Pike (2007) also argued that if civic education is assessed as other subjects, it will discriminate between children by comparing and awarding lower grades to some than others according to a predetermined standard of attainment. This may militate against the notion that all citizens are of equal worth, and would therefore be entirely inappropriate.

There are also debates at the empirical level. Fairbrother and Kennedy (2011) conducted a secondary analysis of the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study. They found that there is only a relatively small benefit of moving to either a compulsory or independent subject approach to civic education. However, a criticism is made that their comparative study, based on the database of the IEA Civic Education Study, had not taken into account the content and teaching pedagogies of the civic education programmes and the backgrounds of the teachers involved, which are critical to the effectiveness of the programmes. In contrast, Keating et al (2010) in their Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) in England put forward six recommendations for effective civic education. The first one is to 'ensure, where possible, that civic education learning is delivered in discrete timetable slots and for more than 45 minutes per week' (p. 65). Another is that 'civic education lessons should be developed by teachers who are delivering the citizenship lessons and not conflated with Personal, Social and Health Education' (p. 66). Similarly, Whiteley's study revealed that treating civic education as an independent subject in England had a positive and significant impact on three key components of civic engagement: efficacy, political participation and political knowledge. These studies seem to support the argument that though civic education, as an independent subject alone, may not be the most critical factor for effective civic learning, together with active pedagogies and well-trained teachers, they become crucial in making civic education effective. But regardless of the debates, the coalition government of the United Kingdom (UK) is considering opting for moving civic education from the national curriculum to the basic curriculum, that is making it discretionary starting from 2014 (Whiteley, 2012).

As a former colony of the UK, the development of civic education in Hong Kong has also been subjected to similar debates. After discussing the debates internationally, in particular with

reference to the UK, this article addresses the research question, 'why is an independent subject not preferred in civic education by Hong Kong civic education teachers?'. The following discussion starts with a brief review of the development of the school civic education policy of Hong Kong, particularly in the adoption of an independent subject approach to civic education for implementation in school. Then it moves on to discuss why teachers reject civic education as an independent subject based on the findings from an interview study conducted by the authors. Similarly to the discussion above, the findings reveal that the major problems are in the teachers' misunderstandings of the nature of civic education. Most of those who reject civic education as an independent subject treat civic education as some kind of educational activity involving the nurturing of attitudes, values and skills of students with little content knowledge. Hence, they consider that civic education is best accomplished through extra-curricular activities and not as a subject that demands discrete time slots in the timetable. It is argued that unless these misunderstandings are addressed, and appropriate remedial actions are taken, the effectiveness of Hong Kong school civic education will remain doubtful. This is unfavourable to the development of democratic citizenship in Hong Kong, which requests a corresponding democratic culture.

The Development and Implementation of Civic Education in Hong Kong Schools

After being a British colony for 150 years, Hong Kong was returned to China on 1 July 1997 in accordance with the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984, and became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR). Before 1980, in order to preserve the stability needed for governance, the colonial government depoliticised schools and civic education [1], and hence the political part of it sank into a dormant stage until the 1980s. At the beginning of 1980s, the British government initiated talks with China over the future of Hong Kong. The Sino-British Joint Declaration reached in 1984 restored China's sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997. Since Hong Kong's capitalist economic system contrasted starkly with the socialist system upheld in Mainland China, Hong Kong became the HKSAR under the principle of 'One Country, Two Systems'. This allows Hong Kong to retain her structure and the existing way of life with a high degree of autonomy. To prepare for self-rule and to address the rising political aspirations of the middle class, the colonial government introduced political reform aimed at building up a representative form of government in Hong Kong. In 1985, the *Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools* (Curriculum Development Council [CDC], 1985) (hereafter called *1985 Civic Education Guidelines*) were released to prepare youth to face the challenges related to the coming political and constitutional changes. This represented a call for civic education after it had been suppressed for decades, though the *1985 Civic Education Guidelines* were criticised as moralised and de-politicised because of the conservative political tone and weakness in political content (Tse, 1997; Leung & Yuen, 2012a).

After the publication of the *1985 Civic Education Guidelines*, several significant political events had tremendous impact on the development of civic education. Perhaps the most important example is the crackdown in China on 4 June 1989 on the Tiananmen Square protestors and the subsequent demonstration by more than one million Hong Kong people in opposition to the crackdown. These events rendered the *1985 Civic Education Guidelines* outdated. The new *Guidelines on Civic Education in Schools* (CDC, 1996) (hereafter called *1996 Civic Education Guidelines*) were issued in 1996, just one year before the handover. It is commented upon as politicised as the agenda for civic education was expanded and included understanding politics and government, learning for democracy, national identity, human rights, and promoting global perspectives (Leung & Yuen, 2009). After the handover in 1997, there were several official documents published that related to moral and civic education. They were described as moralised and re-depoliticised to replace the politicised *1996 Civic Education Guidelines* (Leung & Yuen, 2012a). These re-depoliticised policy documents seem to fit both the HKSAR and the People's Republic of China (PRC) governments' preference to keep Hong Kong as a depoliticised, financial, business, Chinese city (Leung & Ngai, 2011).

Concerning the modes of implementation, over a long period of time, there has been ongoing debate about the advantages and disadvantages of different curriculum approaches and whether the government should mandate an independent subject for civic education. There have been

numerous calls from politicians, educators, academics and civil society urging the government to shift from the policy instruments of capacity building measures and decentralisation to a mandatory subject in the interest of securing more effective implementation of citizenship education (Fairbrother, 2006, 2010; Fairbrother & Kennedy, 2011). For example, Morris and Morris (2001, 2002) argue that the non-compulsory approach produces a large gap between policy intentions and policy outcomes. Ng and Leung (2004) doubt whether schools can deliver citizenship education effectively through the permeated approach. It is also argued that by making it an independent subject, the delivery of civic education will become more systematic, structured, and comprehensive (Fairbrother, 2010). But those who support the non-compulsory and cross-curricular approach argue that it is flexible and diverse enough to suit the complex socio-political conditions of Hong Kong and it can encourage students to think over issues from different perspectives (Lee, 2004; Fairbrother, 2010).

Regardless of the debates, the official document *1985 Civic Education Guidelines* proposed that civic education should not be treated as just another subject and recommended a 'whole school approach' under which civic education could be implemented through formal, informal and the hidden curriculum (CDC, 1985). The *1996 Civic Education Guidelines* recommended three modes of delivery, namely the 'permeation approach', 'integrated-subject approach' and 'specific-subject approach' (CDC, 1996). Schools are free to choose one or more approaches according to their needs and situations. Though the *1996 Civic Education Guidelines* have proposed the strategy of an independent subject, the idea of a mandatory, independent subject had never been adopted as policy. Fairbrother (2010) contested that there appeared to be insufficient support from education leaders for the idea of the Hong Kong government mandating a compulsory, independent, secondary school subject of civic education. The major obstacle appears to be the strong sentiment for school autonomy in making decisions in the school based curriculum. However, regardless of what the guidelines proposed, most schools have adopted a permeation and interdisciplinary approach, supplemented with cross-curricular activities such as school assemblies, special events, and extra-curricular activities, with amounts of time spent and assessment unspecified (Lee & Leung, 2001; Ng & Leung, 2004; Fraillon et al, 2012).

Suddenly, however, in May 2011, under pressure and following a request from the Chinese central government to strengthen the national identity of Hong Kong citizens, and against a background of not preferring the independent subject approach, the HKSAR government announced that civic education was to be replaced by a mandatory independent subject called Moral and National Education in all primary and secondary schools in three years' time. This decision aroused large-scale protests and demonstrations from July 2012 until September 2012. Finally the government was forced to 'shelve' the mandatory independent subject of Moral and National Education and civic education was to be continued as a school-based educational programme. There were many reasons for the strong reaction against the subject. The major reason was that the general public feared that it would become political indoctrination. Another one was that teachers were worried that this new mandatory independent subject would overlap many existing subjects and cause serious problems to the timetabling (Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union [HKPTU], 2011).

But regardless of the policy documents, the views of the education leaders, and the schools' standpoint, what are the views of civic education teachers? We want to study how they perceive the mandatory independent subject approach for junior secondary civic education and their rationales. In particular, we would like to address the research question, 'why is an independent subject not preferred in civic education by Hong Kong civic education teachers?'. In the following discussion, we shall address the above research question based on the findings from interviews with some civic education teachers in secondary schools obtained from a public policy research project.

Research Design

The following discussion is based on the report of the third phase of a larger public policy research project (2007-2010) [2], which aims to determine the suitability and desirability of implementing an independent and compulsory subject of civic education at the junior secondary level of Hong Kong's education system. The project is divided into three phases. The first stage makes use of

international experiences to investigate the relationship between desired citizenship outcomes and the use of any particular curriculum approach to civic education (Fairbrother & Kennedy, 2011). The second stage seeks the views of education policymakers and relevant interest groups on the appropriate approaches to civic education (Fairbrother, 2010). The last phase of the project conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews with secondary school principals and teachers responsible for civic education so as to elicit a range of perceptions and opinions on the most appropriate mode of delivery of civic education for Hong Kong. Specifically, the interviews asked them about the desirability of establishing an independent and compulsory subject of civic education for all junior secondary students in Hong Kong.

In order to ensure that a variety of schools were involved, schools belonging to various sponsoring bodies, geographical locations, religious backgrounds, and delivery modes of civic education were included. By purposive and convenient sampling, 33 secondary schools (out of about 460) in Hong Kong were selected, of which 15 have a civic education independent subject and the remaining ones rely on permeation and cross-curricular activities. We then conducted interviews with 1 to 3 educators from each school, making up a total of 51 participants (4 principals and 47 teachers). Most of the teachers interviewed are coordinators or members of the civic education committee of their respective schools and some of them are teachers of civic-related subjects such as liberal studies and moral education. All interviews, either individual or focus groups, were conducted from June 2009 to January 2010. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the native language of the participants, using the same interview guide which asked the participants their general understanding of civic education, opinions on the strengths and weaknesses of their schools' approaches to civic education delivery, their views on the government's approach to promoting civic education, and their views on making civic education a compulsory independent subject at the lower secondary level. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim in Chinese, coded and then analysed with the help of qualitative data analysis software NVivo to look for themes and patterns. In the following discussion, the article will focus on those teachers who do not want civic education to become a mandatory independent subject. Since both the sample schools and participants were not randomly chosen, we have no intention to generalise any findings from the data. Nevertheless, we hope that the study can shed some light on why secondary school educators would prefer civic education to not become an independent subject and the implications since this is a quite common phenomenon internationally.

Findings and Discussion

Overall, a compulsory and independent subject appeared to be an unpopular curriculum approach among the respondents. In the interviews only 9 out of 51 respondents (17.6%) clearly supported making civic education a compulsory and independent subject for all junior secondary students. Over half, or 28 respondents, (54.9%) opposed this policy or had deep reservations. Another 9 (17.6%) respondents would support the policy conditionally and the remaining 5 (9.8%) made no comment (See Table I).

Preference	Number of respondents	%
Oppose or deep reservations	28	54.9
Support	9	17.6
Conditional response	9	17.6
No comment	5	9.8
Total	51	100.0

Table I. Respondents' views on making civic education a compulsory and independent subject.

Respondents from schools who already teach civic education as an independent subject are more likely than those from schools practising the cross-curricular approach to support the policy. Out of the 22 respondents from schools who teach civic education as an independent subject, a total of 7 supported making civic education a compulsory subject, but only 2 out of 28 respondents from

schools who do not teach civic education as an independent subject supported the idea. However, even in schools who teach it as an independent subject, only 31% of the interviewees supported the policy. There were many reasons why teachers did not prefer teaching it as an independent subject. The reasons will be discussed in detail below under the headings of 'understandings of civic education', 'pedagogies adopted', 'worries about assessment', 'worries about indoctrination', and 'other practical reasons'.

Understandings of Civic Education

Unlike other academic subjects, many of the interviewees – 37 out of 51 (72.5%) – considered civic education as values, attitudes and skills oriented education and as related to life experiences instead of knowledge oriented. This non-academic perception of civic education is well documented (Leung, 1995; Morris & Morris, 2001; Grossman, 2004; Lee, 2005; Lo, 2009; Ng, 2011). Hence, it should be taught through permeation into different subjects, extra-curricular activities and ethos. This idea echoes with Pike's (2007) view. This view is also supported by some of the interviewees:

Moral and civic education is about values and attitudes and is a socializing process. We should focus on school ethos and it cannot be taught through an independent subject. (Mr Yu, School A)

Unlike other academic subjects, civic education involves values and it aims at training students to have better communication with others, and better organizing power. (Mr Ng, School B)

Civic education is about life practice and is better implemented by permeation, general school mood and participation. (Mr Yung, School C)

If civic education is taught by an independent subject, it will become knowledge and academic oriented. But it should be about values and actions. (Ms Chen, School D)

Another important finding about the nature of civic education is that most schools visited are offering moralised civic education. Scholars like Heater (1990) and Oldfield (1990) have argued that the core of civic education is political education because citizens are members of local, national and global political communities with their associated rights, responsibilities and identities. But judging from the teaching content of the 33 schools visited, 25 (75.7%) of them were classified as offering mainly moralised civic education. Four (12.1%) were considered as having a 50-50 ratio of moralised and politicised civic education. Only 4 (12.1%) have more than a 50% content about politicised civic education. This result is probably because of the moralised and depoliticised policy on Hong Kong civic education (Leung & Yuen, 2012b). Together with the loaded inclination towards values education, it is clear that civic education in most of the interviewees' view is a form of moral values education focusing on the private sphere. These understandings of civic education towards values and attitudes in the private sphere affect the pedagogies that they adopt and hence their preferences of mode of delivery.

Pedagogies Adopted

Similar to the concern that the preferred pedagogies for civic education may not sit easily with current pedagogical philosophies tied to content knowledge (Davies et al, 2005), there was a general understanding amongst the interviewees that if civic education is treated as knowledge oriented, the flexibility of curriculum and teaching pedagogies may be lost. Students have to sit in rows to listen to teachers' lectures and this may become spoon-feeding. Some have the concern that it will be hard to teach current issues if the flexibility of curriculum and teaching pedagogies is lost. A total of 16 (31.4%) of the respondents expressed various kinds of worries with regards to pedagogies. For example:

A mandatory independent subject will request students to sit in rows and listen, which is not good for the learning of values. I think permeation in different subjects is better for the learning of values and attitudes. (Ms Chan, School E)

As a values education, we should adopt experiential learning. Moreover, if we use permeation, civic education will become more relevant to students' life experiences. (Miss Lam, School F)

As an independent subject, there will be many restrictions and civic education will lose its flexibility. For example, it will become difficult in using current issues in the teaching. (Ms Tsang, School A)

Worries about Assessment

Similar to Kerr et al's (2007) comment on assessment, 17 (33.3%) of the interviewees expressed worries on the difficulties in assessment if civic education is treated as an independent subject, which will naturally include formal assessment by written examination. Since most of them perceived civic education as moral and values education, they argued that it would be difficult or even impossible to set a reliable standard for evaluation objectively through formal assessment. Recording using portfolio has been suggested with reservation. Therefore, treating civic education as an independent subject is inappropriate.

If civic education is treated as another academic subject, I don't know how we could do assessment. Assessment used for academic subjects is not suitable for values education, such as, civic education. It is difficult if not impossible, to set standards for assessing attitudes and values. (Ms Chan, School G)

I think the most difficult task is assessment, if civic education is taken as a formal independent subject. How are we going to assess students' voluntary service, by the number of service, the time involved or the quality of service? (Mr Lai, School H)

We may try assessment by keeping portfolios of the students. But it is very time consuming and not practical, given our work load. (Ms Lam, School I)

Mr Yu of School B argued that if civic education is treated as a formal independent subject, the nature of civic education may change and become more conservative:

If civic education is formalized and institutionalized as an independent subject with formal assessment, alternative and dissidents' voices will be suppressed because there will be standard answers.

Worries about Indoctrination

A total of 8 (15.7%) of the interviewees had expressed worries of indoctrination and ideological controls if civic education was to be taken as an independent subject, especially if it is made mandatory by the government. This reflects a strong lack of trust between the respondents and government. Ms Wong of School K argued:

If the Hong Kong government wants to mandate the subject, I want to know what rationales they have behind the scene. Is it similar to the ideological education in Mainland China? I must regret to say I don't see a liberal and independent government in Hong Kong at the moment.

Similarly Ms Liu, of School J said:

I don't trust the present government. If they mandate the civic education as an independent subject, it will become some form of ideological propaganda for control.

Ms Liu's colleague, Mr Leung, also expressed the worry about indoctrination, but from different sources:

I am afraid that that it will be controlled by schools which in turn will be controlled according to the ideologies of the sponsoring bodies.

This suspicion of possible indoctrination and partisan influences in politically educating their students in schools is also well documented (Brownhill & Smart 1989; Heater 1990).

Other Practical Reasons

There were several clearly expressed practical reasons that caused the teachers to refuse the mode of independent subject. A total of 14 (27.5%) of the interviewees mentioned the overlapping issue. Subjects or educational programmes that were mentioned which may overlap with civic education

included: economic and public affairs, social studies, life education, religious education, and values education, etc. A total of 10 (19.6%) of the respondents indicated that the timetable is already too packed to accommodate a new subject. A total of 6 (11.8%) of them revealed that adding a new subject will increase workloads and another 6 talked about the lack of qualified teachers.

From the above discussion, it is clear that making civic education a mandatory independent subject is not preferred by teachers. Instead, the permeation and interdisciplinary approach, supplemented with cross-curricular activities such as school assemblies, extra-curricular activities and school ethos, are the preferred modes of implementation for civic education. However, are these preferred modes of delivery of a depoliticised civic education adequate in addressing the political development of Hong Kong?

How Should Hong Kong's Civic Education Move Forward

There are many similarities in the debates taking place in Hong Kong and the UK concerning whether to make civic education an independent subject or not. The issues in both regions are controversial. However, unlike the UK, an established democracy, Hong Kong is in the process of developing its democratic political system and a mature democratic political culture is needed for its healthy development. Given the moralised and depoliticised nature of civic education, in both policy and practice for years, civic education in the majority of schools will continue to be depoliticised after the shelving of the mandatory national education (Leung & Lo, 2012a). This phenomenon, the lack of political education due to the depoliticised nature of civic education, has led to poor understandings of politics, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law among the citizenry, which has negative impacts on the democratic development of Hong Kong. For example, Chan and Chan (2006) pointed out that the colonial legacy and the lack of proper public education about politics have left many in Hong Kong with a misconception of democratic governance. Leung and Lo (2012b) revealed that there is a big gap between the understandings of human rights and the rule of law of liberal studies teachers, who are considered to be important civic educators, and the international human rights standard. This is also partly attributed to the lack of teaching and learning of politics. This negative impact resulting from a depoliticised civic education is manifested by the preferred modes of delivery of not allocating specific time slots in the timetable to discuss political issues. It is clear that there is a gap between what is needed in the nurturing of democratic political culture for the democratic development of Hong Kong and the actual practice of civic education in schools.

In facing the challenges ahead, civic education in Hong Kong has to be reformed in both content and practice. In response to the scenario, the Alliance for Civic Education, a civil society organisation, published the *Civic Education Guidelines from Civil Society* (Leung et al, 2012). Some of the relevant recommendations were:

1. As citizens refer to the members of political communities, local, national, regional and global, and their associated rights, responsibilities, sense of identities, and participation, the core of civic education should be political education. That is the depoliticised nature of Hong Kong civic education should be rectified.
2. Since the lack of political knowledge among Hong Kong citizens is serious and the needs for building a health democratic political culture is urgent, a formal independent subject, or at least a formal independent time slot in the timetable, for the discussion of political knowledge and issues is necessary, so as to enhance the political literacy of the citizens.
3. Since civic education goes beyond knowledge, and includes the cultivation of values, attitudes, dispositions and skills, implementation modes other than an independent subject, or a formal independent time slot in the timetable, is needed, for example, permeation in different subjects, a cross-curricular approach, etc. That is a whole school approach is needed which blends several modes together.

However, since these recommendations are contrary to the findings revealed in this article, research is needed to study how the gaps between the recommendations and findings can be narrowed.

Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, it is well recognised that in order to have effective democratic governance, a politically literate, active, and critically thinking citizenry is necessary. This leads to a renewed interest in education for democratic citizenship and human rights in civic education internationally. Though there are many newly emerging politically socialising agents, such as the Internet and social media, schools, which have long been called the Guardian of Democracy, remain one of the important agents. In order to play the role of Guardian of Democracy effectively, civic education aiming at nurturing citizenry with knowledge, values, attitudes and competences is critical. This holistic education calls for various implementation modes supplementing each other, including independent subject (or at least an independent time slot in the timetable), permeation into different subjects, informal curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and school ethos, etc. It can be argued that different modes of implementation may have different influences on different aspects of learning. However, it seems that civic education as an independent subject is the most controversial mode among the many. There are many reasons leading to the controversies. One of the major reasons is that it reflects different understandings of civic education, particularly on the relative emphasis on the nurturing of knowledge, values, attitudes and competences.

Similar to the controversies above, drawing from the interview data from front line Hong Kong civic education teachers, this article argues that in Hong Kong, because of the prolonged moralisation and depoliticisation of civic education in policy and practice, the understandings of civic education of most of the interviewees are dominated by the idea that civic education is moral values education, particularly in the private sphere. These value and attitude oriented understandings of civic education have strong implications for pedagogies and assessment. Consequently, unlike those traditional academic subjects, which are more knowledge oriented and have to be taught as a formal independent subject, the most appropriate implementation modes for civic education are permeation into different subjects, informal curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and school ethos, instead of being taught as an independent subject. However, the authors argue that this incomplete understanding of civic education deprives Hong Kong students of the opportunities of learning about political knowledge. This is unfavourable for the democratic development of Hong Kong, which demands the nurturing of a mature democratic political culture. Some recommendations for the rectification of the situation from civil society are proposed. Research is urgently needed to explore the tension between the expectation on the nurturing of political culture generated from the democratic development of Hong Kong and the reality in the civic education classrooms. We also need to study how civic education could be adjusted to support the nurturing of a democratic political culture.

Notes

- [1] 'Depoliticised civic education' refers to a civic education curriculum that incorporates little or no teaching content related to politics.
- [2] The research upon which this article is based was funded by a Public Policy Research Funding Scheme project (HKIED8001-PPR-3) of the Hong Kong Research Grant Council.

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