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New Approaches to Citizenship Education: an example of discussion classes from China

In this article Daibo Chen and Ian Davies share some teaching and learning innovations being developed in China, and illustrate how some common concerns are being addressed.

China's huge population of more than 1.3 billion people (made up of 56 ethnic groups) is undergoing dramatic social and economic change. In this context the nature of citizenship education is obviously of great significance. How does such a rapidly changing society explain itself to its own citizens? How do educators help people to understand and take part in society? Given the challenge of achieving and maintaining a common identity harmonized simultaneously to an ancient traditional culture, a socialist political system and an enterprise economy, the Chinese national and local governments, together with many universities and schools are developing new forms of ideological and political education. In this brief article we draw attention to the ways in which Chinese citizenship education is organized prior to discussing the research methods. In a spirit of common commitment to good practice in education we suggest that citizenship educators around the world will want to know more about what is happening in China.

Chinese approaches to citizenship education (i.e. attempts to help people understand contemporary society and develop the skills to take part in it) encompass ideological education, political education and moral education. In primary schools all students take a course titled 'Moral and Nationalism' in the middle school students must complete a course, 'Ideology and Morality' (including morality, rights, duties, and the understanding of society). In secondary schools there is a required course named 'politics' (with the Middle school curriculum this overlaps to some extent with the English form of citizenship education). In universities undergraduates undertake four required courses: Ideology, Law, and the Theory of the Characteristics of Chinese Socialism. The core of the lecture is the most commonly used teaching method but it is becoming apparent that, although students think that it is important to learn about society, these rather traditional teaching methods are becoming increasingly unpopular.

In light of a rapidly changing society in the context of the new established commitment to forms of educating about society there are various experiments taking place. One of those innovations has been developed by colleagues at the East China University of Political Science and Law (ECUPL). This new teaching approach has been called the 'Multilateral Discussion Class'. The key feature of this new approach is to emphasize interaction between students and teachers around a challenging issue. An example from the Multilateral Discussion class approach focuses on the question: "What is a Chinese citizen?". How does such a rapidly changing society explain itself to its own citizens? How do educators help people to understand and take part in society? The example given above is just one of many different scenarios that are presented to students. One of the most significant issues emerging from this new approach is that it has been extremely popular with students. The opportunity to discuss a real issue has been welcomed by students. This is highly relevant to their lives, and obviously important in the connections that are made with morality, national identity and law, for the whole country. The opportunity to interact with the class guests who have interesting experience is highly prized. Indeed it seems that the impact of the guests may be greater than that usually achieved by the class teacher. A range of voices has been allowed into the Chinese classroom and the nature of a diverse and changing society may be made real as people contemplate the new forms of citizenship that are becoming possible.

There has been the opportunity of only a limited amount of research into this new approach. An investigation of 78 Multilateral Discussion classes involving approximately 3000 university students in 2 years showed that 97.5% expressed their satisfaction, 61.8% agreed the teaching was more interesting than that of the traditional class, and only 5.3% thought the new approach to teaching was less interesting than that of the traditional class. There has been some official recognition of the value of this new approach with the award in May 2014 of the second grade prize in education in Shanghai to those who have led the work.

The initiative described here is, of course, just one example of new approaches developing in China. There are significant questions that are still to be investigated. The alignment of new pedagogical approaches within current social and political trends within the larger Chinese society will always be fascinating. The legal framework that characterizes citizenship as well as the traditional Confucian-inspired values that are vitally important in China today will inform what happens in schools and universities. In October 2014 the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party decided to incorporate legal education into the national education system. The justification for this new approach is to help young people to become law abiding citizens protecting their rights with legal knowledge. The nature of what Chinese students learn from these new approaches will need to be explored further.

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