**Active citizenship in Japan: How do Japanese citizenship teachers perceive participation in society?**

**Abstract**

This study addresses the two questions: “How do Japanese civics teachers perceive participation in society?” and “What are the factors that influence their views on participation in society?” For this purpose, active citizenship in this paper is defined as participation in society including voting, political activism, and community involvement. The dataset for this study consists of semi-structured interviews with 11 secondary school civics teachers from different parts of Japan. Participating teachers were asked about citizenship ideals in terms of identity, civic virtue, political involvement, and requirement for democratic society. Results of thematic analysis suggest that the Japanese civics teachers were reluctant to participate in protests and demonstrations. Instead, actively seeking information about causes of protests and being critical about government policies are suggested as alternative approaches. Illustrating Japanese civics teachers’ perception of active citizenship for young people based on the findings from interview data, this article contributes to further understanding the conceptual diversity of active citizenship in terms of political, cultural, and social contexts. Possible reasons why protesting is not a preferable option are also considered. (**Key words**: Active citizenship, citizenship, participation, civic education, Japan).

**Introduction**

Active citizens are those who “critically engage with and seek to affect the course of social events” (Ross 2012:7), rather than being passive citizens who vote, obey laws, and are loyal to the state. One could relate Asian societies to passive citizenship due to reported findings that social cohesion is prioritized over individuality (Lo 2010) and commitment to the state rather than individuals’ active involvement in civic action (Roh 2004). Nevertheless, it is also possible to argue that the concept of active citizenship, discussed by several scholars (Ross 2012; Jerome 2012; Peterson 2011; Crick 2010), may not be inclusive enough to understand participation in the Asian context. Reichert et al. (2020) note the importance of considering the influence of cross-national differences that lead to diverse perceptions of democracy and citizenship concepts.

This article illustrates how civics teachers in Japan perceive active citizenship for young people based on findings from conducting interviews. In the Japanese context, some teachers are ‘progressive educators’ who promote students’ participation in political processes such as petitioning as well as civic engagement to address public concern (Motani 2007). Nevertheless, it is suggested that teachers can also be less critical and take conformist approaches in their teaching. Kawamura et al. (2017) report that a persistent lack of social awareness among pre-service teachers and their weak interest in social issues are a concern for the development of citizenship in Japanese society. Based on her study about a minority teacher’s personal narrative, Osler (2018) demonstrates individuals’ sense of political and moral responsibility varies depending on their teaching philosophies, experiences, and backgrounds. This study offers further understanding of the complexity of active citizenship that involves cultural, social, and political influences.

This study contributes to the contextual understanding of active citizenship with the case of Japanese society. For instance, democratisation in Japan is different from Europe and North America in a way that it comes from the top, such as from the government, rather than citizens (Kobayashi et al. 2021). The findings of this study also address Isin and Nyers’s (2014: 7) call for consideration of ‘specific ways that citizenship is enacted globally’ and investigating the ‘all-encompassing idea of liberal democracy.’ For this purpose, the following research questions are addressed: 1) How do Japanese civics teachers perceive participation in society? and 2) What are the factors that influence their views on participation in society? To understand the Japanese context and the interpretation of the data, the first sections introduce the definition of active citizenship proposed in this article, the theoretical framework, and a summary of citizenship and civics education in Japan. Following a brief explanation of data and methodology, findings and conclusion are presented in the last sections of this article.

**Definition of active citizenship**

Scholars see active citizenship as civilians’ engagement in society through a wide range of activities (Enchikova 2021; Martínez et al. 2019). Enchikova et al. (2021) relate it to civic and political participation aimed at addressing issues of concern. Martínez et al. (2019) also define active citizenship in terms of participating in civic or political organizations such as the ones related to political parties, human rights issues, and voluntary/charity organizations.

Active citizenship originates from a civic republican focus which is about the capacity to effectively participate in a deliberative democracy (Peterson 2009). Snir and Eylon (2016) also recognize that ‘republican citizenship is active’ as it is about deliberative efforts of citizens to achieve freedom (p. 589). The concept of active participation has developed from the call for enhanced sense of obligation to communities and development of participatory citizenship in various aspects of public life (Peterson 2011). Moreover, active citizenship is interpreted with the influence of neoliberalism. In the context of England, for instance, the conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s to early 1990s was a proponent of ‘individualism of free market’, hence active citizenship reflects the conservative emphasis on rights and responsibilities of individuals over the state (Kerr et al. 2008: 180). Active citizens interpreted through the lens of Thatcherism are those who abide by the law, are able to utilize the opportunities offered by the market, and possess a certain amount of compassion toward others (Gibson 2015).

The aforementioned neo-liberal interpretation of active citizenship, such as individuals’ rights and responsibility and compassion toward others, is closer to personally responsible citizenship which is characterized with acquisition of civic knowledge, moral responsibility, and conformity to social and political structure (Weinberg 2020). However, some scholars question whether philanthropic and voluntary activity can be active citizenship because it lacks the emphasis on participation in political communities (Peterson and Knowles 2009). Jerome (2012) also maintains that active citizenship should not be mere participation in the community, inspired by a sense of duty and respect among individuals and cultural unity. Crick (2010) argues that citizenship is incomplete without a collective act to defend the interest of the self as well as others. Thus, it is possible to argue that active citizenship should address political ideals (Jerome 2012).

It is often the case that active citizenship is linked to challenging and seeking accountability of government about whether it upholds the interest of citizens (McCowan 2009). Yang and Hoskins (2020: 841) also argue that citizens need to have a ‘critical voice’ in order to participate in more ‘intensive forms’ of political engagement such as protesting in their attempts to influence policy-making and make the government accountable. Nevertheless, active citizenship can be defined in broader terms such as ‘the concept of engagement’ (Yang and Hoskins, 2020, p. 841). The sole emphasis on political participation possibly excludes other diverse forms of participation such as aforementioned philanthropic or voluntary activities as well as cross-national diversities of citizenship (Roh 2004; Lo 2010). To broaden the concept of active citizenship and to explore what it means in Japanese society, this article draws on Yang and Hoskins’s (2020: 841) definition of ‘active citizenship as an action in political life voting and protest, and activities in civil society or community volunteering.’

**Theoretical framework**

I draw on McLaughlin’s (1992) minimal and maximal citizenship and Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) three models of citizens as a theoretical framework because this approach can illustrate criticality in terms of individuals’ awareness of being a citizen (McLaughlin 1992) as well as forms of participation (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). McLaughlin (1992) illustrates that minimal citizenship emphasizes understanding existing government structure and social morality while maximal citizenship is about critical reflection of government and considering the ways to eliminate social injustice. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) propose three types of citizens, namely the personally-responsible citizen who acts responsibly in their community, the participatory citizen who actively takes part in the improvement of the community, and the justice-oriented citizen who critically looks at and addresses inequality or injustice generated through social, economic, and political structures.

Wood et al’s (2018:260) ‘spectrum of conceptions of active citizenship’ facilitates synthesizing McLagulin’s (1992) minimal and maximal citizenship and Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) three models of citizens. Wood et al. (2018) position maximal, justice-oriented citizenship at one end and minimal, personally responsible citizenship at the other end of a spectrum according to the degree of awareness and competence to address social injustices. Wood et al. (2018) suggest that minimal, personally responsible citizenship relates to such characteristics as obeying the law and fulfilling duties, while maximal, justice-oriented citizenship is about awareness of obstacles to bring about social justice and questioning structural inequalities. Participatory citizenship, which is recognised as active participation in community and taking initiative in established structures, is placed in the middle. I illustrate this explanation with Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1 Spectrum of active citizenship**

Minimal Maximal

Personally responsible Participatory Justice oriented

The spectrum illustrates the range of participation as participatory citizenship can be placed between minimal, personally responsible citizenship and maximal, justice-oriented citizenship (Knowles 2018). Wood et al. (2018) explain that participatory citizenship is a more active form of citizenship than minimal, or personally responsible citizenship, as it is about active engagement but falls short of critical analysis of society and challenging the status quo. The framework can illustrate and facilitate further understanding of active citizenship which may not sufficiently fit conventional classifications such as conformity/passive or critical/active citizenship.

**Citizenship and citizenship education in Japan**

Davies et al. (2013) recognise the complexities of citizenship and citizenship education in Japan as well as in other Asian societies. In Japan, the complexity is reflected in the three terms *Kokumin, Shimin*, and *Koumin*, all of which mean ‘citizen’ in English. Parmenter et al. (2008) and Davies et al. (2013) explain that *Kokumin* means ‘national citizen’ with legal rights and duties, *Shimin* is ‘private citizen’ of sovereign nation who actively engage with the society and *Koumin* means ‘citizenship based on natural law’ and combines both interpretations of *Kokumin* and *Shimin. Shimin* can be linked to Ross’ (2012) definition of active citizens who have critical perspectives and engage with society in an effort to make positive changes. *Kokumin*, which is about legal rights and duties of national citizens, can be identified as passive / good citizen who is obedient and fulfils duties (Ross 2012: 7). These three different terms of ‘citizen’ suggest that there are both passive and active conceptions of citizenship in Japan.

Passive citizenship in Japan can be seen in traditional social values and patriotism. Traditional values and cultures remain influential especially when it comes to gender. People’s attitude toward gender equality remains conservative in Japan because the traditional social values and culture rooted in Buddhism and Confucianism still persist today (Eto 2010). Nakano (2018) argues that the dominant political party Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) reinforces the conservative model of family that positions men as breadwinners working outside the home and women as responsible for family and childcare. Due to the persisting traditional gender roles, women’s representation in politics remains low in Japan (Eto 2005). Maeda (2005: 347) also recognizes the ‘dominant normative value’ that defines politics as men’s profession and ‘cultural inhibition’ that triggers self-restraints or social pressure that prevents women’s participation in politics. Similar to traditional values that hinder women’s political participation, socio-cultural context also potentially discourages activism. Based on interviews with environmental activists in Taiwan and Japan, Droz (2021) reports that speaking up and confrontation are recognised as less favourable acts in society due to the cultural context that encourages harmony within the community. Kobayashi et al. (2021) also suggest that avoiding political demonstrations is rooted in a fear that being connected to political activists might lead to losing one’s reputation and being seen as extremists.

Although traditional values and patriotism can be observed in Japanese society, passive and obedient citizen do not represent Japanese citizens fully. Obedience to the government may not always be true, as Krauss et al. (2016) note that Japanese citizens’ trust in their government and politicians has been low. People in Japan have become more critical toward the government following the government’s failure to address the nuclear disaster caused by the Great East Japan earthquake 2011 (Krauss et al. 2016: 19). Moreover, citizens can be active in a different sense. Ikeda and Richery (2005) found that people in Japan do have political opinions and interest in civic life but they talk about politics with those who they are in close relationships with. Furthermore, Japanese activist groups are small in general with a focus on local issues (Arrington 2016). Activist groups in Japan are pragmatic and localised, working on such issues as ‘local democracy’ (*chiiki minshushugi*), ‘the reform of local politics’ (*jichitai kaikaku*) and ‘citizen participation in local government’ (*shimin sanka*) through non-protest forms of activism (Avenell 2010: 28).

Furthermore, it is possible to see that traditional values in Japan are changing now. More Japanese women question traditional gender roles (Eto 2010). Assumed homogeneity of Japanese society also needs to be questioned, as Siddle (2010) argues that ethnic diversity exists with a considerable number of ethnic minorities living in Japan. Nevertheless, progress is slow, as Eto (2010) notes, for example, that women still find it difficult to act on their own beliefs due to the conservative social environment. The aging population can bring about a further move towards conservatism in politics. With the increasing number of elderly residents who retire and go back to their urban communities, Japanese politicians and leaders are likely to shift towards more conservative policy and strategies to entice senior voters (Takao 2009). Accordingly, one can surmise that Japanese society and citizenship education reflect both passive and active citizenship (Ross 2012).

Passive citizenship, characterised by traditional values, and active citizenship, characterised by critical and active engagement in civil and political lives, are reflected in moral education and social studies respectively. Patriotic education dates back to peace education that is aimed at fostering individuals who can contribute to world peace in the spirit of the Japanese Constitution such as individual dignity, democracy, and Japanese culture (Ide 2013). Since 2000, patriotic education takes the form of an independent subject called moral education. Ide (2013: 448) notes that it is aimed at developing a ‘correct patriotism’ as a national citizen who has experienced misery of war and is ready to contribute to establishing world peace. Furthermore, neo-liberal emphasis combined with patriotism endorses passive citizenship. Kitagawa (2016) notes that education policy is aimed at fostering ‘self-governing and self-directed individuals’ who are responsible for themselves (p. 634).

In addition, there is also an institutional context that led to the depoliticization of education. In Japan, it is not unusual to see less emphasis on politics and an avoidance of controversial topics in classrooms. Yumoto (2017: 57) maintains that schools and classrooms in Japan tend to be ‘flavourless’ and ‘sanitised spaces’ because the aim is to develop a ‘sensible citizenship’ through acknowledging each other’s opinions and critically examining existing policies while political activities for or against any specific political party are avoided. Depoliticization is partly due to the Japanese culture that is characterised by ‘harmony in community’ (*komyunitii no ittaisei*) (Nakata, 2020: 488) and regulations requiring teachers to avoid any political leanings and ideologies in their classrooms (Yumoto 2017).

On the other hand, curricula such as social studies can be related to active citizenship. Parmenter et al. (2008) maintain that the civics area of social studies is aimed at active engagement in public affairs. There has been a call for citizenship education to dismantle the prevailing neo-liberal values of market and global competitiveness (Davies et al. 2015). Through their research on Japanese teachers’ approach to political literacy in a variety of curricula including moral education as well as social studies, Davies et al. (2013) found that the aim is to develop young people’s capacity to take part in the contemporary society. Yumoto (2017) also maintains that increased attention is paid to opportunities for young people to deliberate on controversial matters. Participatory learning is also given more importance.

Governments’ education policies often put emphasis on tradition, morality, and patriotism, but teachers can make efforts to use textbooks creatively and selectively in order to avoid nationalistic content (Bamkin 2018). It is possible to hypothesize that Japanese civics teachers emphasise both passive orientations of traditional values and moral responsibility as well as active participation through criticising government policies and deliberations. Park (2001) argues that there is no need for a definite division between the Asian civic virtue and Western values of liberal democracy. Davies et al. (2013) also call for ‘multiple and plural interpretations of democratic values’ that can help us to go beyond the distinction between ‘east’ and ‘west’. This paper offers clues to plural interpretations of active citizenship.

**Methodology**

*Data / Population*

The data presented in this article was collected through 11 civics teacher interviews. In order to get insight into experts’ views that can facilitate understanding of and explore the concept of active citizenship, I interviewed teachers who have professional and academic interest in citizenship. Those teachers who teach at elementary schools were excluded as there is no civics curriculum for primary education in Japan. This study utilized snow-ball sampling which involves identifying potential participants and asking them if it is possible to refer the researcher to other participants (Sharan et al. 2015). As the data was anonymised, I refer to participants using pseudonyms in the findings section.

Although it is not possible for qualitative research to have generalisable data, efforts have been made to sample an as diverse population as possible. Due to the reported difference in people’s attitudes to social openness and traditional social values between urban and rural areas (Eto 2010), I approached participants both in urban and rural areas. The most challenging issue was to find female civics teachers. I was informed by academics in Japan as well as participating teachers that there are far fewer female teachers than male teachers in civics education subjects. Although I was able to interview one female teacher for this study with cooperation from participants, I have to acknowledge that female teachers are underrepresented. This underrepresentation possibly reflects the Japanese society that women’s participation in politics remains low due to traditional attitudes to gender equality and persisting gendered division of labour discussed previously (Nakano 2018; Eto 2010; Maeda 2006). Appendix II summarizes participants’ background.

*Data collection*

To understand civics teachers’ views on active citizenship, I decided to carry out semi-structured interviews with a set of prepared questions. Semi-structured interviews help pursuing a set of questions and looking further into emerging topics that could be interesting for the research (Blandford 2016). The list of questions prepared prior to data collection facilitated this purpose. Although interview questions were prepared beforehand, it did not impede the sequence of the conversation during the interview.

The list of questions displayed in Appendix I was mainly influenced by McLaughlin’s (1992) framework through tailoring questions to understand participants’ perceptions of identity, civic virtue, political involvement, and social prerequisite for democratic society. Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) framework influenced the list of questions to a lesser degree because I intended to understand how Japanese civics teachers conceptualise citizenship in terms of sense of being a citizen rather than types of participation. Nevertheless, data analysis was informed by both McLaughlin (1992) and Westheimer and Kahne (2004) as initial stages of the data analysis indicated that the concept of active citizenship is important to understand participants’ views on citizenship. The interviews with Japanese teachers were carried out in Japanese. In order to avoid the possible loss of nuanced meaning, I translated only the quotes included in the findings section of this article.

*Data analysis*

This study draws on thematic analysis following the six procedures suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013), namely familiarization with the data (1), generating initial codes (2), creating initial themes (3), reviewing initial themes (4), defining and naming themes (5), and writing the report (6). I also borrowed some approaches and perspectives from Terry (2016) to carry out these procedures. For instance, I found it useful to do transcribing myself as Terry (2016) explains transcribing interviews manually and by the researcher is time consuming but valuable in terms of being familiarized with the data.

For generating the initial codes, the process involved creating a meaning based on the data itself and interpretation (Terry 2016). I relied on the meaning of the data itself as well as my interpretation which comes from reviewing relevant literature. The two theoretical frameworks (Westheimer and Kahne 2004; McLaughlin 1992) facilitated the subsequent steps to create and refine themes by providing a lens through which I categorised codes. I am aware that my own experience influenced the theme development process, as Braun and Clarke (2021) explain that researchers’ values, skills, and experience mediate the process to generate and develop themes. Being Japanese (having grown up, been to school, and worked in Japan), I am familiar with the context such as culture and social norms. On the other hand, having lived, attended university and worked in England provides me with another lens to see the data from a different perspective. For this reason, I acknowledge reflexivity in the coding process.

**Findings and Discussion**

This section presents findings based on analysing interviews with civics teachers. The findings are also discussed in relation to other scholars’ work on citizenship and civics education. Through analysing the data with thematic analysis, I developed the main theme ‘participation’ with several sub-themes including ‘reluctance to take actions such as protests’ and ‘alternative approaches to protests.’ These two themes suggest a coexistence of criticality and conformity in Japanese civics teachers’ views on active citizenship. The details of the findings are presented below.

***Reluctance to take actions such as protests***

*Protests are not respectable acts*

Some of the participating Japanese civics teachers felt reluctant to take part in protests. For instance, one of the participants is concerned that protesting is not a respectable act in the society.

Political demonstrations and lobbying are uncommon in Japan, I see that. Participating in demonstrations is a courageous act. The Japanese society is like, one could lose a job opportunity if he/she joins a May Day demonstration. I myself do not really participate; I hardly take civic actions. (Eita)

The interview excerpt, presented above, suggests there is pressure to conform to rules and norms of the society. This pressure is possibly due to cultural as well as political reasons. In terms of cultural reasons, Kobayashi et al. (2021) suggest people in collectivistic societies such as Japan distance themselves from political demonstrations, which are seen as a disturbance to social harmony with extreme political views. There is also a political aspect to this which requires teachers to avoid any reference to political ideologies or positions in their lessons (Yumoto 2017).

Reluctance to protesting is characterised as minimal citizenship to socialise oneself into dominant values for ensuring stability (Sim and Print, 2009). De Ruyter (2008) interprets minimal citizenship as being able to ‘speak dominant language’ and having ‘moral, political and social knowledge’ (p.353). However, it is doubtful whether Eita wishes his students to be citizens who conform to dominant values. This is because he emphasizes a critical perspective toward the government which will be explained later. It is likely that the teachers themselves feel reluctant to take part in protests, although they know the value of taking such actions. Due to the aforementioned cultural and political contexts, it is difficult for them to take part in confrontational forms of participation such as protests because of the risk of harming their reputation and potentially affecting one’s career as Eita explains.

*Public morality and civic responsibility*

Another reason that Japanese civics teachers feel reluctant to participate in protest can be explained by public morality, which Anzai (2015) interprets as relationships with society such as individuals’ social contributions, sense of attachment, and sense of responsibility to the community. Drawing on the concept of public morality (Anzai 2015), I propose that public morality is reflected in the interview data as participants refer to harmony with others and balance between individuals’ self-interest and collective values. For instance, one of the participants, Takuya, says:

Public welfare and peaceful democratic society require individuals not to be too arrogant and reconcile their own self-interest...Students think being active in a class such as speaking up is a good thing, but as a teacher who observes the whole picture, it is not necessarily so. If considering the collective unity, one should not be too self-assertive, too arrogant. But this is difficult to say as individuals’ identity and personality should also be respected. (Takuya)

The excerpt above suggests that Takuya feels one should not be too assertive in order to have a balance between individuals’ self-interest and collective interests. The sense of public morality reflected as ‘collective unity’ and reconciling others’ interest for public welfare can be related to some scholars’ interpretations of maximal citizenship (Wahrman and Hartaf 2019; Akar 2017; Sim and Print 2009). Collective unity can be about maximal citizenship because it brings about solidarity and collective interest in growth in civil society (Akar 2017). Wahrman and Hartaf (2019) also maintain that maximal citizenship includes common purpose and unity that motivate individuals to participate in attempts to address public problems as well as contribute to public good. For this purpose, reconciling with others’ interest is important. This is also explained by Sim and Print’s (2009) interpretation of maximal citizenship, namely that the capacity to respect differences in values and perspectives is a prerequisite for effective participation in public affairs. Hence, it is suggested that public morality such as individuals’ contributions to society motivated by a sense of collective identity and unity can be related to maximal citizenship.

Nevertheless, the excerpt from Takuya’s interview presents a complex sense of participation as it involves both active participation which is about maximal citizenship as well as conformity which can be related to personally responsible citizenship. Reconciling with others’ interest and collective unity are maximal citizenship according to Wahrman and Hartaf (2019) who suggest that commonality, unity, and respect for each other lead to participation in society and efforts to support public good. On the other hand, being considerate towards others (not being too assertive or arrogant) can also lead to personally responsible citizenship such as being obedient, law-abiding, and conforming to social norms (Lefrançois and Cambron-Prémont 2017, Lucas and Clark 2016). These characteristics of personally responsible citizenship potentially hinder individuals’ capacity to critically acknowledge public values and competence of political reasoning which McLaughlin (2004: 158) identifies as ‘moral texture.’ (McLaughlin, 2004). McLaughlin (2004) explains that a sense of morality such as respect and tolerance is about reasonable disagreement and respectful disapproval of perspectives rather than unequivocal acceptance and complete avoidance of disagreement. Accordingly, a possible interpretation is that maximal, personally responsible citizenship can lead to active participation in society for common good and collective unity while it potentially limits individuals’ capacity of critical engagement with society due to preference for respect and avoidance of disapproval of others’ opinions.

The excerpt from an interview with Shirou offers an example of maximal, personally responsible citizenship as he talks about doing good deeds for the benefit of the general public or civil society:

I think it is about a balancing act, balance between individuals’ interest and collective interest. One should reconcile self-interest and community or society’s needs. This way, we can contribute to the society. For instance, a good citizen can control one’s selfish desire for society. In this pandemic, if you want to go to a bar for a drink, you would need to consider others. You should restrain yourself from drinking and meet people for the interest of the public not to spread the virus. A good citizen can reflect one’s behaviour and act responsibly. (Shirou)

The emphasis on ‘interest of public good’ and ‘desire of the society’ is maximal citizenship in Wahrman and Hartaf’s (2021) definition. It should be noted that data collection took place in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time of the interview, the Japanese government advised its citizens not to meet others in crowded, closed, and close-contact settings. Hence, drinking at a bar is not a recommended action because it is a place which could be crowded, closed, and people talk with little distance with each other. Personally responsible citizenship represents not only good personal character but also being a law-abiding, responsible citizen (Fry and O’Brien 2015; Sondel 2015). This is presented as civic responsibility such as being responsible for others and self-control to restrain the want of drinking at bar for the public good during the pandemic.

***Alternative approaches to protests***

*Participatory citizenship and interest in political affairs*

Taking part in political protests might not be a preferred option for Japanese civics teachers in this study. Nevertheless, they see participation is important and suggest alternative forms. For instance, Haruto explains:

Active citizenship can be both active and passive. For instance, the active side can be like running for an election, being in a centre of politics. But [citizens’ action] can also be helping or volunteering for election administration commission. Not only by direct involvement but also this kind of actions are participation, participating in political arena…Of course, participating in demonstrations could be effective depending on the case. However, I would say it does not always have to be like that. ‘Passive action’ could also be disposition required for a citizen. (Haruto)

In Haruto’s sense, active citizenship ‘does not always have to be’ political demonstrations. He sees citizens’ action such as supporting election process or volunteering for election administration offices also as participation. These actions can be participatory citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne 2004) which is recognised as taking leadership or playing an active role to improve society through contributing to an established system or a community (Fry and O’Brien 2015).

Moreover, having political interest is also a form of participation. Haruto encourages his students to actively seek information about causes of protests:

I often say it is like a ‘weapon’, it means one always has and secures means to participate in politics. It is rather passive but I think it is also an important quality of citizens. It is like one is not shooting a gunshot but making attempts to secure that ‘weapon.’ This means like actively seeking information about political demonstration and understanding it through the internet, although it does not necessarily mean participating in it. Or, in terms of human rights, one knows his/her rights to make petitions. I think not only participation itself but also securing the means to participate as well as being ready to participate is also important. Perhaps, having a practice to use the ‘weapon’ for participation could also be important though. (Haruto)

The excerpt above illustrates a possible alternative to protesting. It involves an analytical and inquiry-based approach such as seeking information about current social issues. Obtaining civic knowledge is important to empower young people (Brodie-McKenzie 2020) and develop critical reflection and understanding of political involvement in democratic society (Fouts and Lee 2005). Identifying problems, collecting, evaluating the information can be ‘key habits for active civic participation’ and maximal citizenship (Sim and Print 2009: 710).

*‘Critical participation’*

Some of the participating civics education teachers talk about the importance of political literacy skills in order to critically analyse the information one receives. As Tomohiko’s reference to ‘freedom of the press’ indicates (see below), some people are concerned about the 2013 Designated Secrets Law, introduced by then LDP government. The government claimed that the law is intended to foster diplomatic relationships with the US for national security and defence against terrorism. Nevertheless, some argue that the law prioritises protection of state secrets at the expense of the principle of the right to know and freedom of the press (Stockwin and Ampiah 2017). Stockwin and Ampiah (2017) also note that the Secrets Law can be abused without a system to check the legitimacy of classified information. This can be the context that some teachers raise a call for increased level of critical thinking and political literacy.

It would be great if one could bring about social change. But the first step should be receiving information critically as freedom of the press is being lost in Japan. I think we should not be passive but have a perspective to cast a doubt and analyse the information critically. (Tomohiko)

With regard to making an informed decision and political literacy, I think it is important not to accept the news without any thoughts but analyse the resource and credibility. It is kind of like an ability to cast a sceptical eye, ability to think from multiple perspectives. I think these are political literacy. (Shirou)

Tomohiko’s and Shirou’s views, presented above, corroborate Wheeler-Bell (2014), who argues that critical perspectives and interest in politics are prerequisite for active citizenship. Adebayo (2019) also interprets that maximal citizenship is about critical understanding and inquiry into civic matters. Social critique and critical thinking skills are also linked to justice-oriented citizenship (Lefrançois and Cambron-Prémont 2017; Marri et al. 2013). The key aspect, as both Tomohiko and Shirou emphasize, is critical thinking such as having sceptical eyes and perspectives, which are competencies of critical inquiry skills (Verugelers 2007).

Moreover, Eita explains being critical about government and making those in power accountable can also be participation:

Taking actions is important but I would say what is important is intelligence, ability to check accountability of politicians we voted to represent, check how tax is spent. If needed one should raise a voice. But I wonder, I am not too sure about taking actions, not sure if I’d emphasize it. But I do think one should have interest in society and check the accountability of the government. In everyday life, critical participation can be reading newspapers and checking the accountability of the government. One can do these things. (Eita)

Eita’s emphasis on accountability and checking government policies demonstrates critical perspective to challenge the government and check if it is upholding the interest of citizens (McCowan 2009). However, Winch (2004) recognizes that critical analysis and criticism of society could be less favourable to some because it brings about ‘danger of instability’ (p. 475). As it is illustrated in Eita’s reluctance to taking part in protests, one could see that there is a possible conflict of criticality and conformity. It is worth noting that ‘critical participation’ mentioned by teachers in this study differs from criticality that is about questioning and critiquing the social structure that cause inequality and injustice (Castro 2013). Drawing on Johnson and Morris (2010), the ‘critical participation’ that the participating teachers mentioned is more oriented toward critical thinking skills to apply logic rather than critical pedagogy to challenge social structures that cause inequality.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to further developing a spectrum of active citizenship (Wood et al. 2018) which locates participatory citizenship between maximal, justice-oriented citizenship and minimal, personally responsible citizenship. Findings suggest that active citizenship includes individuals’ involvement in support of democratic process such as elections. At least in the Japanese context, it is possible to argue that active citizenship can take a form of participatory citizenship such as contributing to or actively engaging in established systems in attempts to enhance the society or one’s own community.

Interpretation of maximal, justice-oriented citizenship can also be broadened as this study indicates that active citizenship involves not only actions that are physically taking place such as voting and protests but also attitudes or perspectives for active engagement in society. Some participants in this study suggest that interest in politics and critical analysis of government policies are also forms of ‘critical participation’. A possible argument is that critical participation is a form of maximal, justice-oriented citizenship because seeking accountability and checking the credibility of information require critical thinking skills such as competences to apply logical and critical reasoning.

This study also brings about an additional interpretation to the spectrum of active citizenship due to the Japanese context which is influenced by traditional values of Confucianism that prioritise collective interest and harmonious relationships (Kobayashi et al. 2021). Findings suggest a possibility of maximal, personally responsible citizenship which reflects both sense of solidarity to contribute to the society and adhering to social norms for collective unity. Maximal, personally responsible citizenship implies that the traditional emphasis on collective interest potentially leads to ‘weak autonomy’ of having an autonomous choice only if it is ‘considered acceptable by society’ (Winch 2004:480) while it can also promote robust support for civic responsibility to improve the society for a common purpose (Wahrman and Hartaf 2019). Moreover, there are different senses of collective unity among participants in this study. Those who work in rural, less prestigious schools tend to emphasize collective unity and interest more than the ones who work in urban, prestigious schools. This is because Shirou and Takuya who work in less prestigious state schools in rural area highlight collective unity and conformity while Haruto who works in urban affluent state school encourages students to be politically informed and be ready to take part in political processes including protests. The possible difference between urban and rural area can be explored in future research because this study is not robust enough to support this difference fully due to the small amount of data collected.

Preference of collective unity highlights the dilemma in civic education noted by Winch (2004). Japanese civics teachers who embrace critical thinking may face a challenge due to the dilemma that schools are required to socialise citizens into social values while there is a need for developing individuals’ ability to critically analyse society (Winch, 2004). Moreover, the political context of Japan also brings another challenge for teachers because political issues are recognised as a taboo (Nakata 2020) and political neutrality is a legal requirement for teachers in Japan (Yumoto 2017). Kodama et al. (2016) suggest that this depoliticization can be traced back to the 1950s when scholars of education advocated a separation of politics and education to develop children’s genuine abilities to pursue their own happiness. Motani (2007) speculates the shift toward student-centred, problem-solving pedagogy reflected in the introduction of integrated studies in 2002, offers a space for some progressive teachers to initiate change.

Future research could further look into the implication of teaching active citizenship in Asian societies. With the emphasis on participatory citizenship and possible broader interpretation of maximal, justice-oriented citizenship suggested in the findings, this study indicates that Japanese civics teachers wish their students to develop skills to critically analyse information they receive as well as government policies. Nevertheless, findings also confirm the importance of collective unity reflected as maximal, personally responsible citizenship. Further research could shed light on curricula and pedagogical approaches for teacher training to develop the competence in teaching critical thinking skills in Japanese society or other contexts that face the dilemma between teaching social values and developing critical perspectives. It could also look further at the relationship between teachers’ experience both inside and outside of the classroom and their development of critical thinking skills and competence to teach it.

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**Appendix I: List of interview questions**

* What kind of identity would you think is required for responsible citizens? (e.g., respects others, etc)
* How do you think citizens should behave as members of the public / society?
* How would you define the political rights and responsibility of citizen to address problems in the society?
* What would you think is required for effective citizenship which contributes to people’s welfare and forming a peaceful and democratic society?

**Appendix II : Participants’ background**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Pseudonym & gender (m: male or f: female) | Subject they teach | Class background | School type | Location of school |
| Eita (m) | History, Civics, Geography, and Japanese | Middle class | State school (junior-high) | Kyoto |
| Haruto (m) | Civics, Social science | Unable to self-identify, but maybe middle class | Affluent state school (high school) | Hyogo |
| Isao (m) | Civics, Social science | Middle class | Private school (high school) | Osaka |
| Kotaro (m) | History, Civics, Geography | Middle class | Private school (junior high school) | Tokyo |
| Kumi (f) | Civics, Social science | Middle class | State school (high school) | Tokyo |
| Mamoru (m) | Civics, Social science | Middle class | Private (integrated system of junior high & high school) | Tokyo |
| Ren (m) | Civics, Social science | Middle class | State school (part-time high school) | Tokyo |
| Shirou (m) | Civics, Social science | Unable to self-identify, but maybe middle class | Less privileged state school (part-time high school) | Shiga |
| Takuya (m) | Civics, History, Geography | Working class | Less privileged state school (Junior-high) | Kyoto |
| Tomohiko (m) | Civics, Social science | Middle class | State school (high school) | Fukui |
| Yuichi (m) | Civics, Social science | Middle class | State school (high school) | Kanagawa |