Alternative policy measures for improving citizenship education in Hong Kong

ABSTRACT
Despite adjustments to Hong Kong’s citizenship education since the 1990s transition period to Chinese sovereignty, survey research and public opinion suggest that citizenship education, as currently practised in Hong Kong, shows considerable continuity with the pre-1997 period and is not achieving intended results in areas such as the development of national identity and active citizenship among students. This article aims to contribute to explanations for such ineffectiveness and to determine whether there are more effective government policy measures which could improve the provision of citizenship education. Specifically, the article explores the question of whether the Hong Kong government should mandate a compulsory, independent subject of citizenship education at the secondary school level. Based on interviews with sixteen education leaders from government bodies, education concern and advocacy groups, teachers’ unions, citizenship education-related teachers’ associations, student associations, political parties, and academia, it addresses more specific questions about the intended outcomes of citizenship education, the role of government in attempting to achieve those outcomes, the strengths and weaknesses of current citizenship education practice, suggested methods for improving upon ineffective practices, and the possibility of (and obstacles to) mandating an independent citizenship education subject. The article concludes that while making citizenship education compulsory would address many concerns about its current ineffectiveness, the independent subject approach would not necessarily help to achieve improved outcomes and would raise other substantial concerns from the education community and society at large.
INTRODUCTION

The goal of this article is to explore the question of whether the Hong Kong government should mandate a compulsory, independent subject of citizenship education for secondary schools. It does so by reporting the views of education leaders on specific questions about the role of government in attempting to achieve citizenship outcomes, the strengths and weaknesses of current citizenship education delivery, suggested methods for improving upon ineffective practices, and the possibility of (and obstacles to) mandating an independent citizenship education subject. The article bases its discussion of citizenship education upon Janoski’s definition of citizenship as ‘passive and active membership of individuals in a nation-state with certain universalistic rights and obligations at a specified level of equality’ (Janoski 1998: 9). Along these lines, citizenship education first covers teaching and learning about membership in the nation state, including national identity, national history and culture, national values and morals, and other knowledge and attitudes shared by members. Second, citizenship education functions to arm learners with knowledge of and attitudes toward citizens’ shared rights and duties, including those of political participation.

Since 1985 the Hong Kong government has recommended that schools convey citizenship education through one of three approaches: permeation, whereby relevant content is incorporated into the teaching of multiple subjects throughout the school curriculum; as an integrated subject, such as integrated humanities or social studies; or, as an independent school subject (Morris and Morris 2001). In support of implementation of any of these modes, the government issued civic education guidelines in 1985 and 1996 and renewed direction on moral and civic education in the 2002 Basic Education Curriculum Guide (Fairbrother 2006a). The merely advisory nature of these guidelines, however, has resulted in considerable diversity in the interpretation of the aims of citizenship education, disparity among schools in attention to implementation, and community and scholarly concern about the appropriate balance among civic, moral, democratic, and patriotic emphases (Cheng 2004; Fairbrother 2006a; Law and Ho 2004; Lee and Sweeting 2001; Leung and Ng 2004; Leung 2008; Morris and Morris 2001; Tse 2007; Yu and Byram 2007).

These concerns about the nature and implementation of citizenship education have been compounded by research findings and community perceptions of numerous inadequacies with regard to the citizenship knowledge and attitudes of Hong Kong youth. Comparative research has found that youth are relatively weak in knowledge of and positive attitudes toward the nation (Fairbrother 2008), relatively politically passive and disengaged (Kennedy, Hahn and Lee 2008), and below international means with regard to economic and social responsibilities, positive attitudes toward the nation, and support for women’s political rights, even as they are above international means in civic knowledge and trust in government and the media (Lee 2003). Popular perceptions of youth within the Hong Kong community have focused on the weakness of their social morality, civic consciousness, political understanding and interest, national pride, and numerous other social and political attitudes (Fairbrother 2005).

Accompanying these concerns have been numerous calls in Hong Kong society and political circles for citizenship education to be instituted as a compulsory, independent subject in the secondary school curriculum (Fairbrother 2006a). In essence, these calls are for the government to shift from the policy instruments of capacity building measures and decentralization to a mandate,
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in the interest of securing more effective implementation of citizenship education (McDonnell 2004; McDonnell and Elmore 1987). This would bring Hong Kong into line with other societies using a compulsory, independent subject approach to citizenship education (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo 1999). However, because such a move would also move Hong Kong’s citizenship education practice closer to that of Mainland China, there has been concern in some sectors that an independent, compulsory subject would amount to indoctrination (Fairbrother 2006a).

This article does find that concern about indoctrination is one aspect of resistance to an independent, compulsory approach to citizenship education among leading educators, but also that this is but one of several more practical concerns about effective implementation. These concerns are revealed through interviews with sixteen education leaders from government bodies, education concern and advocacy groups, teachers’ unions, citizenship education-related teachers’ associations, student associations, political parties, and academia, as one part of a large project addressing the question of what Hong Kong’s education policymakers, relevant interest groups, principals, and teachers view as the most appropriate and effective form of citizenship education for Hong Kong in terms of its aims, content, and delivery.

METHODOLOGY

The following sections report the views of sixteen education leaders on the following questions:

- How can the government best support the achievement of expected outcomes of citizenship education?
- What are the strengths of current citizenship education practice?
- What current practices in citizenship education are relatively weak or ineffective?
- How could citizenship education be improved?
- What would be the potential for an independent, compulsory subject of citizenship education?

The sample of interviewees was drawn based on an open-ended socio-metric, by which interviewees were selected based on their reputations in the field while allowing for an enlarged sample as interviewees recommended others who could provide insight into the relevant issues (Kennedy, Lo and Fairbrother 2004).

Interviews, conducted in Cantonese, were carried out between April and August 2009, with respondents assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Interviewees were most familiar with the permeation and integrated subject approaches adopted by most Hong Kong secondary schools, and mainly discussed the independent subject approach as a potential alternative.

The interviews were conducted in an exploratory manner, with the objective of gaining insight into the nature of attitudes on the issue of curricular approach, and the interview schedule was semi-structured along the lines of the above research questions. Analysis of the responses consisted of identifying and closely examining portions of responses according to the main themes of expected citizenship education outcomes, strengths and weaknesses of current practice, areas and potential methods for improvement, and obstacles
to moving toward an independent subject approach. Interviewees’ responses, based on a small sample, were taken not to be representative of any larger groups, but rather to demonstrate a range of views on the questions at hand. In the following presentation, therefore, actual numbers of responses are not reported, lest they give an impression of broader levels of support for one or another view. Also, because of the qualitative nature of answers, without a quantitative instrument allowing interviewees to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement, it is not possible to indicate the comparative strength of their views.

THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN ACHIEVING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION OUTCOMES

In discussions, interviewees addressed the question of how the Hong Kong government could support the achievement of numerous outcomes, including national identity, critical thinking, and knowledge of rights and responsibilities. Their answers emphasized the importance of placing citizenship education on the policy agenda, as well as mandates and inspection, capacity building measures, and the devolution of curriculum delivery. First, noting that policy implementation in Hong Kong was a largely top-down process, the government, and the Education Bureau in particular, was called upon to place citizenship education more squarely on its policy agenda. With policy only partly dependent upon pressure from the public and the Legislative Council, Hong Kong’s executive-led government would be able to swiftly implement any measure. While some interviewees claimed that the government had already done much to support citizenship education (most recently with priority accorded to ‘national education’ and an overall review of moral and civic education within the 2001 and 2002 curriculum and basic education reforms), others felt that strong government action on citizenship education was hindered by political considerations, resulting in, for example, a very narrow approach to national education. Others felt that the government did not regard citizenship education as important, exemplified by an apparent lack of clear vision, the absence of relevant consultations or policy documents in comparison to previous administrations, no comprehensive planning or evaluation, no standard curriculum, and the inclusion of moral and civic education in the curriculum only as one of five ‘other learning experiences’.

One option mentioned by several interviewees would be for the government to mandate for all schools an independent, compulsory subject of citizenship education, as it had done with the subject of liberal studies in the senior secondary curriculum. Such a move would be followed by schools and textbook publishers making the necessary arrangements to accommodate the change, and by the government inspecting schools to ensure that implementation was taking place. The implications of this potential measure will be elaborated toward the end of the article.

An alternative policy instrument currently utilized by the government to support schools’ implementation of citizenship education is that of capacity-building, including the provision of a set curriculum and relevant resources. Building upon 1985 and 1996 guidelines on civic education, in 2002 the Curriculum Development Council (CDC) designed and since then has encouraged the implementation of a ‘moral and civic education’ curriculum framework. The CDC recommends this central curriculum to schools as a reference, with
schools encouraged to make use of and adapt it to the needs of their teachers and students. It provides the direction, approach, and strategies for moral and civic education, emphasizing both moral and civic education through a holistic, values-based approach. This framework was revised, updated, and expanded in 2008.

Some interviewees commended the government for providing additional resources for citizenship education since Hong Kong’s return to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. First, it has sponsored and organized professional development programmes for teachers, including short-term programmes, seminars, and workshops. Second, it has developed additional teaching and learning resources with a regular updating of online resources for schools’ use. Third, the Education Bureau itself has organized various citizenship-related activities for students. Particularly prominent has been the provision of resources for national education, with study tours to Mainland China organized and subsidized by the government.

Despite these measures, several interviewees felt that resourcing was insufficient and that the government needed to increase the level of support to schools and teachers. As an example, there has been no teaching load reduction for citizenship education coordinators in schools, who are left with little time to design coherent programmes. Financial resources provided by the government are also limited, and comprehensive training for teachers is lacking.

For other interviewees, the government’s resourcing of specific citizenship education activities was problematic. For some, government involvement in the provision of citizenship education was viewed as interference, because of its conservative nature. Specific mention was made of the inadvisability of the government’s organization and sponsorship of study tours to Mainland China for teachers and students. Such resources should instead, according to some interviewees, be provided directly to schools to be used at their own discretion. A related issue was that of content, with concerns that these tours would only highlight China’s positive achievements without touching upon the sensitive issues of censorship, freedom of expression, and one-party rule. Therefore, the government was advised by some to continue and expand the current practice of funding non-governmental organizations to develop citizenship-education teaching materials and programmes. On the other hand, this approach was alternatively viewed by some as evidence of government neglect and an abdication of its leading role in citizenship education provision.

A related policy instrument at the government’s disposal for promoting the implementation of citizenship education is the devolution of authority for implementation to organizations and schools. Along these lines, interviewees explained that with only a few schools actually operated by the government, most Hong Kong schools are government-subsidized but actually operated by a variety of school sponsoring bodies, which each enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy in implementing certain education policies. Under these circumstances, while the government provides the planned curriculum, decisions on its actual implementation are devolved to schools, mediated by their sponsoring bodies (see also Morris and Morris 2001). The result is considerable diversity in citizenship education practice, ranging from conservative to anti-establishment, with schools permitted to adapt the curriculum framework according to the mission, vision, and tradition of their sponsoring bodies as well as the views of school leaders and the needs of teachers and students.
THE STRENGTHS OF CURRENT CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PRACTICE

This autonomy, flexibility, and diversity in delivery was viewed by some interviewees as one of the key macro-level strengths of Hong Kong’s citizenship education provision, given Hong Kong’s complex political and social conditions under ‘One country, two systems’. Within the limits of the ‘education ordinance and education regulations’ – the legal basis by which the government guards against biased political education in schools and calls on teachers to present information only in an unbiased, objective, and rational manner (see Fairbrother 2006b) – schools and teachers are free from government interference to make decisions on how to deliver citizenship education. They may choose among permeation, integrated subject, and independent subject approaches; choose to emphasize local, national, or global perspectives; and choose the appropriate blend of Chinese or western concepts based on diverse overseas models of citizenship education. Within the general approaches, schools are offered the choice of delivery through the subjects of economic and public affairs, social studies, integrated humanities, civic education, or other relevant subjects, and are free to decide upon appropriate pedagogies, extra-curricular activities, and teaching materials. Among the teaching materials and teacher-training programmes available are those produced and organized by a variety of concerned non-governmental organizations of diverse religious and political backgrounds.

The independent subject approach was mentioned by some as an effective practice in that it guaranteed that citizenship education enjoyed a set proportion of the school timetable. Others considered that treating citizenship education as a form of whole-school education was particularly effective since its scope was very broad, relevant to numerous school subjects, and encompassing of knowledge, skills, and values. In this respect, citizenship education effectively integrated classroom learning and practical activities, as well as both the formal and hidden curriculum, as recommended in the 1996 civic education guidelines. An interdisciplinary, permeation approach was seen as effective, based on a perception of the successful cultivation of citizenship qualities among the latest generation. In this way, citizenship education, and in particular elements of national education, could be infused into nearly all school subjects, ranging from economic and public affairs to Chinese history, geography, biology, and chemistry.

THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION PRACTICE

Discussions with interviewees revealed a plethora of perceptions of weaknesses and ineffective practices in citizenship education. Some weaknesses were specifically attributed to the government’s overall management of citizenship education. One aspect of this overall strategy, the granting of autonomy to schools to choose a specific curricular approach, was seen by some as a problem because it offered schools too much discretion as well as a choice between two ineffective curricular approaches.

As described earlier, there were perceptions of a general neglect of citizenship education by a government lacking the will to implement it properly. Specific criticism was made of the broad scope of citizenship education, which hindered teaching in the absence of clear government guidelines. Hong Kong’s approach was described as unorganized, unsystematic, ad hoc, and neglectful.
of a clear progression of intended outcomes for different grade levels. Furthermore, government policy was seen as inconsistent and dependent upon political considerations of the time. These factors made it difficult for teachers to know what to teach and created worry about moving citizenship education practice in the wrong direction.

Thus, while the autonomy granted to schools in citizenship education delivery was perceived by some as a strength, for other interviewees it signified the government’s foregoing of its own responsibility. Autonomy was also seen as creating a series of other problems. First, the variation among schools accompanying autonomy was viewed by some as problematic, with different schools teaching similar topics through different curriculum and activities, implying different understandings of citizenship education. Second and more problematic, autonomy meant variation in the level of attention paid by different schools, with conscientious schools organizing numerous activities and ambivalent ones few. Third, autonomy left too much to chance, with provision dependent upon individual schools’ will, effort, and the ability and personality of individual school leaders. All of this meant that it was nearly impossible to comprehensively assess and measure schools’ citizenship education performance.

Autonomy in implementation was also interpreted by some as contributing to the potential for biases or imbalance in specific emphases of citizenship education in different schools, seen as a reflection of a lack of societal consensus on major socio-political issues. Some considered citizenship education content to be overly moralistic and focused on ethics, with schools focusing their efforts on the relatively safe arenas of family, community, moral, and sex education. Others saw current citizenship education discourse as too politicized and critical. Along this line, inappropriate practices included inviting politicians or radio talk-show hosts to give talks to students, discussing controversial political events such as the Tiananmen Incident, and even using newspaper articles for class discussion, all because of the potential for anti-government, negative bias.

Related to this was considerable discussion of potential bias reflective of two of Hong Kong’s major political camps: the pro-democracy camp and the pro-Beijing patriotic camp. Bias toward the democratic camp was seen as exemplified by an overemphasis in citizenship education on human rights and the rule of law, and a neglect of national history, education about contemporary China, and the encouragement of students to support Chinese government policies. Others conversely perceived that education in democracy and human rights were neglected, especially after 1997, pointing to some schools’ perception of human rights education as subversive and worries that students taught more about their rights would abuse them. Along similar lines, there were perceptions of an increasing overemphasis on national education and propaganda, to the detriment of ‘civic education’, creating potential for schools to promote a submissive citizenship. Some criticized national education for being one-sided and inconsistent with reality, particularly by only presenting China’s positive achievements. Patriotic rituals such as the flag-raising ceremony were singled out as formalities with no educational purpose other than indoctrination.

As discussed earlier, some interviewees perceived the whole-school permeation and integrated subject approaches as a strength. Others saw the choice of these approaches granted by school autonomy as creating a variety of problems, implying that autonomy and choice basically resulted in further ineffectiveness. The permeation approach was explicitly mentioned as ineffective by several
According citizenship education only very limited space in the curriculum was seen as insufficient, especially compared to societies where it constituted a formal subject in the curriculum, such as Mainland China, Taiwan, and the United States. The result was perceived to be unrealized learning outcomes.

Fundamentally, the permeation approach was viewed as according citizenship education only superficial treatment. It was described as diluted, perfunctory, piecemeal, unsystematic, ridiculous, laughable, infrequent, fragmented, and limited. The permeation approach was seen to represent an overall neglect of citizenship education, with few schools allocating significant time for related education and activities, only conducting it in their spare time. Some interviewees perceived that schools were ambivalent and unwilling to exert the effort at best, and engaged in self-censorship at worst. This type of situation resulted from schools’ own lack of civic consciousness and ideals and an instrumental approach to education as human resources training. Schools’ numerous priorities were seen to rest outside citizenship education, with emphasis instead placed on students’ academic results, preparing for public examinations, and other activities that improved schools’ reputation and enhanced their accountability to the public. Permeation, integrated approaches were seen as having no lasting impact on students, making it difficult for students to engage in deep thought about citizenship issues, and providing them with few opportunities to express their own opinions.

Within schools, the non-compulsory, integrated nature of citizenship education affected teachers’ attitudes as well. Few teachers saw it as useful, important, or meaningful and were thus reluctant to teach it. Teachers of established subjects in the curriculum paid little attention to integrating into fixed subject syllabuses non-examined citizenship education elements, and saw their primary responsibility as faithfully teaching their subjects and preparing students for examinations. Teachers lacking in civic consciousness and ideals would also lack the passion to motivate their students to understand difficult and potentially sensitive concepts and issues. There was even a perception that teachers (most of whom had grown up during Hong Kong’s colonial era) lacked national identity and were concerned more with their own rights than contributing to the nation.

The lack of attention accorded by schools and teachers to whole-school approaches to citizenship education was seen as affecting students’ attitudes toward it. For the most part students were not interested in citizenship education, treated it as unimportant, lacked the motivation to participate in related activities, and were often bored by it. This was because the subject was not examined, students had often learned related content in earlier stages of education or in other activities, and because many teaching materials being used were outdated.

**IMPROVING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION**

Some interviewees maintained that any reform of and improvement in Hong Kong’s citizenship education practice would require substantial societal change and democratization. Other more realistic suggestions for improvement reflected the very problems with citizenship education identified above, but revealed the lack of consensus even among this small group of interviewees. Citizenship education content could be improved by increased emphasis either on morals and values or on civic and political issues. An overemphasis on
content concerned with democracy, law, and rights could be assuaged by more content on national education and responsibility, and vice versa. Alternatively, a good balance among different concepts and elements could be sought and related teaching resources more evenly distributed. While some felt that citizenship education should be made more relevant to students’ daily lives, others suggested the enhanced use of patriotic rituals. Others saw improvement coming more from a stronger emphasis on critical thinking, even encouraging students to be more critical of China, with discussions of both positive and negative events in Chinese history fostering a more comprehensive understanding of their nation among students. One interviewee concluded that citizenship education should transcend the political divisions in society to strive to be unbiased, balanced, critical, and factual.

Interviewees suggested several ways the government could increase its support for citizenship education. The provision of enhanced teacher training and the production of additional teaching resources (and funding to non-governmental organizations to produce an even wider variety) would help to demonstrate that the government acknowledged the importance of citizenship education. Another government measure would be to issue new clear guidelines to schools and develop a curriculum with clear targets for each grade level to meet students’ needs and avoid repetition and overlap of curricular content. Even more broadly, it was suggested that the government establish a task force to comprehensively review citizenship education policy, conduct consultation, and develop a revised overall plan for citizenship education.

For some interviewees, such a plan should maintain the spirit of autonomy granted to schools to implement citizenship education according to their needs and strengths, a strategy again perceived as less subject to government control. Citizenship education would continue to be school-based, but would be clearly distinguished from teaching to prepare students for public examination. Rather than mandating an independent compulsory subject, some compulsory components of citizenship education could be formally integrated into subjects throughout the existing curriculum, ensuring that all students would learn basic citizenship concepts. Such an enhanced permeation approach would help to foster students’ interdisciplinary understanding and thinking skills, in addition to fostering their civic consciousness.

THE POTENTIAL FOR A COMPULSORY, INDEPENDENT SUBJECT OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

For other interviewees who viewed permeation and integrated subject approaches as empty talk and fundamentally unfeasible because of a lack of room within existing subject curricula to infuse further content on citizenship, citizenship education would only be improved with the mandate of an independent, compulsory subject, placing it on par with other school subjects. This approach would help to ensure a comprehensive, systematic method of delivery, with a well-structured curriculum, clear guidelines, and targets for student achievement in each grade. The subject could consist of several modules covering, for example, key concepts of national identity, rights and responsibilities, the rule of law, ethics, and family values. This approach is similar to that of Mainland China and Taiwan; content would focus on the core principles of citizenship, but would be delivered not only through classroom teaching but
also through games, field trips, project learning, dialogue, enquiry, discussion, debate, drama, and exchange programmes. One alternative would be to at least formalize Chinese history as an independent compulsory subject rather than the current approach of infusing its content into the subject of integrated humanities.

Supporters of a compulsory, independent subject expected that with the government taking the lead in this way, other supporting features would follow. For example, textbook publishers would publish citizenship education textbooks and teaching materials; the subject would be taught by teachers with specialist training; and students’ achievement would be assessed, providing extrinsic motivation for students to focus attention on learning. It was also suggested that assessment measure not only knowledge but also take into consideration students’ moral attitudes and behaviour.

To make such a move, and to enhance the effectiveness of citizenship education, a number of obstacles would need to be overcome. First, if assessed, an independent subject would need to manage Hong Kong’s examination culture and emphasis on knowledge acquisition, memorization, and the recitation of facts. Related to this would be concerns of citizenship education amounting to ideological indoctrination, one-sided national education, value standardization, and government intervention. Suggestions for overcoming these obstacles included emphasizing the development of students’ critical thinking skills and the use of a variety of pedagogies and activities. This, in turn, would require overcoming the obstacle of a lack of qualified teachers with specialist knowledge and able to make use of non-traditional pedagogies, through government planning and support for citizenship-education teacher training.

An additional obstacle would be the perennial concern about a lack of curriculum space for an additional independent subject, with the time allocated to other subjects needing to be reduced or other subjects eliminated. Related to this would be the question of the slippery slope, with other integrated and permeated subjects also potentially clamouring for compulsory, independent status. This in turn raised the fundamental question of the very rationale for mandating an independent subject, with interviewees asking what the objective criteria were for such a move and whether teachers and students would understand the purpose of the subject. Interviewees also noted that an additional shift in education policy could be viewed with resentment and resistance among schools, parents, and students.

Interviewees also noted that experience had shown that only a few schools had voluntarily chosen the independent subject approach to citizenship education, raising the issue of school autonomy in choosing citizenship education curricular approaches. With a mandated independent subject, schools would lose this autonomy, would have less flexibility in implementation, and would potentially have different understandings of the subject based on their backgrounds and sponsoring bodies. There was also a related concern about a compulsory, independent subject going against what was seen as a worldwide trend towards curriculum integration.

A final obstacle to mandating an independent subject would be the lack of societal consensus over its value and content. Interviewees predicted that under Hong Kong’s current political and social circumstances, planning for the citizenship education curriculum would involve heated public debate and substantial difficulties in reconciling diverse opinions. These difficulties would, potentially, not end with the mandate: different school sponsoring bodies
would still understand the concept of citizenship differently and there would be continuing societal contention over its delivery.

Overcoming these last obstacles would require concerted effort on the part of the government. Extended consultation over the content would be required, and the government, schools, and teachers would need to work closely together to decide how to deliver the subject. The government would also need to demonstrate its determination, publicly recognize and emphasize the importance of citizenship education, and strongly encourage its implementation.

Supporters of an independent subject were optimistic about its potential, noting that the government had been successful in mandating the subject of liberal studies in the recently reformed senior secondary school curriculum. Others, however, were less hopeful, stating that the larger political environment would not permit such a move until Hong Kong had made further progress toward democratization and rid itself of traditional values and colonial ideology through generational change.

**CONCLUSION**

This article set out to answer the question of what Hong Kong’s education policymakers and relevant interest groups view as the most appropriate and effective form of citizenship education for Hong Kong in terms of its aims, content, and delivery. It has specifically focused on whether the Hong Kong government should mandate a compulsory, independent subject of citizenship education for secondary schools. The article concludes by taking each section above as an angle from which to view this question.

From the first angle of policy instruments at the disposal of the government, it is clear that Hong Kong relies on capacity building and devolution of authority to schools for implementation, rather than a mandate. The interview data presented in this article first suggest that a potential shift in policy instrument would first require the government to place citizenship education more firmly on its policy agenda than is currently the case. With regard to the advantages of specific instruments, McDonnell and Elmore (1987) suggest that mandates are the instrument most likely to produce compliance with and uniformity of efforts toward intended goals. With regard to current policy, however, while there appeared to be concern among some interviewees that capacity-building measures and resources provided by the government were insufficient, the level of resourcing was not such that implementation was significantly hindered. Similarly, while devolution of implementation to schools appeared to result in diversity in the nature and level of delivery, because of the Hong Kong education system’s well-established tradition of autonomy, such diversity with regard to citizenship education was, to some extent, actually valued more than condemned.

Viewing the question from the second angle of the strengths of current citizenship education practice, we can ask the question of whether a mandate of a compulsory, independent subject would significantly enhance those strengths. Many of the strengths identified in interviews existed regardless of the curricular approach, and school autonomy and the permeation and integrated subject approaches were explicitly identified by some interviewees as strengths in themselves. While some viewed a compulsory, independent approach as a strength, it was again unclear whether, on balance, this approach would outweigh the benefits of other approaches.
From the third angle of weaknesses of citizenship education practice, we can ask the question of whether a mandated compulsory, independent subject would resolve the major issues. On one hand, it is possible that such a move would help to make citizenship education more systematic, uniform, focused, and balanced, and encourage schools, teachers, and students to treat it more seriously. Here, however, we could break up the question to ask whether what is important is the mandated and compulsory nature of citizenship education or, alternatively, the independent subject approach. From the specific weaknesses identified, it appears that a mandate of compulsory citizenship education (accompanied by clear direction and firm guidance) would improve on ineffective practices, but that an independent subject alone would not do so.

From the fourth angle of recommendations for the improvement of citizenship education, we can ask whether a mandated compulsory, independent subject would better achieve improvement. Again the answer to this question appears to require examining the mandate and compulsory nature of delivery separate from the curricular approach. Many of the suggestions offered were peripheral to the curricular approach, and most boiled down to stronger organization, direction, balance, support, and resourcing. A mandate of compulsory citizenship education could contribute to these, but again an independent subject alone would not necessarily do so.

The final section of the article explicitly addressed the question of the advisability and implications of mandating a compulsory, independent subject of citizenship education. In conclusion, we can first ask whether the identified benefits of doing so would also be achievable through other approaches. Looking closely at these identified benefits, it would appear that the improvements might not take place without a government mandate of some form of compulsory citizenship education, but that they could actually come from varying curricular approaches and would not necessarily require an independent subject. With regard to overcoming the various obstacles to a shift of government policy and curriculum approach, interviewees themselves suggested appropriate methods, drawing attention to concerted effort, determination, and resources. The only obstacle to a mandated compulsory, independent subject that would be impossible to overcome would appear to be any strong sentiment for school autonomy in making decisions on the delivery of citizenship education.

Given the numerous considerations at the levels of society, government policy, the education system, schools, curriculum, pedagogy, teachers, and students explored in this article, there appears to be insufficient support for the idea of the Hong Kong government mandating a compulsory, independent secondary school subject of citizenship education. More worthwhile to improve citizenship practice and outcomes, however, would appear to be a mandate that some form of citizenship education be compulsory, with decisions on how to deliver it within this requirement left up to schools. The possibility of such a move occurring, however, given the range of opinion in society represented by the interviewees in this study, would seem to depend upon the appearance of strong policy advocates in Hong Kong's evolving political context.

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