

Transformation of Civic Education in Hong Kong: Repoliticization and Ideological Control from Liberal Studies to CSD

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformation of Hong Kong's citizenship curriculum from Liberal Studies to Citizenship and Social Development (CSD) as a case of deliberate educational repoliticization. Using a qualitative literature-based approach that analyzes curriculum documents and scholarly sources, the research identifies how CSD replaces critical, inquiry-based learning with state-directed instruction emphasizing national loyalty and a simplified national narrative. Unlike previous studies that primarily describe policy shifts, this research contributes a theoretical perspective by framing curriculum change as an ideological state apparatus that narrows reflective and participatory spaces in semi-authoritarian contexts. The findings reveal that, despite these constraints, students still exercise symbolic agency subtle forms of resistance or reinterpretation of official narratives within the classroom. This highlights the dual nature of civic education as both a tool of state control and a site of contested meaning. The study recommends safeguarding academic freedom, integrating critical thinking and dialogue into the curriculum, and empowering teachers with greater pedagogical autonomy to ensure that civic education nurtures informed, critically engaged citizens.

Keywords: citizenship, curriculum, ideology, repoliticization

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji transformasi kurikulum kewarganegaraan di Hong Kong dari Liberal Studies menjadi Citizenship and Social Development (CSD) sebagai bentuk repolitisasi pendidikan yang disengaja. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan terhadap dokumen kurikulum dan sumber akademik, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa CSD menggantikan pembelajaran kritis berbasis inkuiri dengan instruksi yang diarahkan negara, menekankan loyalitas nasional dan penyederhanaan narasi kebangsaan. Berbeda dari studi sebelumnya yang cenderung bersifat deskriptif, penelitian ini menawarkan kontribusi teoretis dengan memandang perubahan kurikulum sebagai aparatus ideologis negara yang mempersempit ruang reflektif dan partisipatif dalam konteks semi-otoritarian. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa meskipun terdapat pembatasan, siswa tetap menunjukkan symbolic agency – yakni bentuk resistensi atau reinterpretasi narasi resmi secara halus di ruang kelas. Hal ini menegaskan sifat ganda pendidikan kewarganegaraan sebagai instrumen kontrol negara sekaligus arena perebutan makna. Studi ini merekomendasikan pentingnya menjaga kebebasan akademik, mengintegrasikan keterampilan berpikir kritis dan dialog dalam kurikulum, serta memperluas otonomi pedagogis guru agar pendidikan kewarganegaraan mampu membentuk warga negara yang terinformasi, kritis, dan aktif secara sosial.

Kata Kunci: kewarganegaraan, kurikulum, ideologi, repolitisasi

Introduction

Civic education is one of the most strategic public policy instruments for shaping citizens' identity, political awareness, and loyalty to the nation-state. Through curriculum design and teaching methods, the state not only transfers knowledge but also directs citizens' ideological orientation toward the prevailing power system. In periods of heightened geopolitical tension and rising nationalism among major powers, civic education often becomes a vehicle for strengthening state legitimacy and hegemony over younger generations (Banks, 2017).

In the context of Hong Kong, the transformation of civic education became a critical issue after the territory's handover from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997. Under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework, Hong Kong initially retained a pluralist and democratic education system. One of its milestones was the launch of Liberal Studies in 2009, a curriculum encouraging critical thinking, social issue analysis, and active citizenship engagement (Mahdi, Syamsuddin, & Sunarso, 2025). However, the emergence of large-scale pro-democracy demonstrations particularly the 2014 Umbrella Movement and the 2019 anti-extradition protests prompted the PRC government to undertake a drastic revision of the civics curriculum (Fok, 1997).

Liberal Studies was designed to cultivate civic awareness and critical reflection in line with the ideals of deliberative democracy and emancipatory education as proposed by Dewey (1916) and Freire (1970). It encouraged students to understand governance systems, debate controversial issues, and think independently (Fung & Liang, 2018). This democratic orientation, however, came under increasing pressure from Beijing, which perceived the curriculum as contributing to radicalization and fostering opposition to the state. In 2021, the government replaced Liberal Studies with Citizenship and Social Development (CSD), which prioritizes nationalism, the Basic Law, and Chinese national development while removing critical analysis of social issues (Koon, 2022).

Comparative studies highlight how the concept of a "good citizen" is shaped by the type of political regime. Li (2021), in a study of mainland China (authoritarian), Taiwan (democratic), and Hong Kong (hybrid), found that civic education in Hong Kong exists in a tug-of-war between critical citizenship and loyalty to the motherland. Similarly, Grossman, Lee, and Kennedy (2008) reveal that Hong Kong's civic education has long navigated the tension between promoting citizen participation and serving the legitimacy needs of the state. While these tensions persist, Manning (2023) notes that civic education reflects broader political conflicts in Hong Kong society: despite state control, classrooms still function as spaces where students and teachers express alternative political ideas.

Although these studies shed light on ideological dynamics, they tend to remain descriptive and do not fully examine how curriculum reform operates as a

systemic instrument of state control. This study advances the discussion by framing the shift from Liberal Studies to CSD as a deliberate process of educational repoliticization an intentional ideological restructuring designed to narrow discursive spaces in schools. In Althusser's (1971) terms, schools serve as ideological state apparatuses, making curriculum change both an educational policy and a political strategy in a high-capacity state such as the PRC.

Previous research strongly supports the view that curriculum change in Hong Kong is inseparable from broader political strategies. Morris and Vickers (2015) demonstrate that education reforms especially those involving moral and national education are historically tied to political efforts to shape identity and loyalty. Fung and Su (2016) further show that Liberal Studies significantly influenced students' socio-political participation, including their involvement in the Umbrella Movement, which led to heightened state suspicion toward critical pedagogy. Mok (2005) identifies a consistent pattern in East Asian authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems, where curriculum serves as an instrument for social control and national identity construction. More recently, Zhao, Kennedy, and Wang (2024) reveal that post-handover pedagogical discourse in Hong Kong increasingly recontextualizes national identity within a restrictive framework, limiting teachers' autonomy and reducing opportunities for open discussion. These findings collectively indicate that the transformation from Liberal Studies to CSD is not merely a pedagogical adjustment, but a strategic move to consolidate political authority and manage ideological outcomes among the youth.

Despite extensive scholarship on Hong Kong's civic education, there remains limited understanding of how the CSD curriculum restructures the balance between reflective learning and state-led ideological control, and how students navigate or resist these shifts. This study addresses that gap by examining how the transformation reflects the state's repoliticization of education, the extent to which CSD diminishes reflective and participatory functions, and how students exercise agency whether through acceptance, reinterpretation, or resistance within the new civic framework. By doing so, the research contributes to the theoretical development of critical citizenship education and offers reflections for democratic societies such as Indonesia on safeguarding education from excessive ideological intervention.

Method

This study employs a qualitative library research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. The library research method was chosen because the research questions focus on the ideological and pedagogical dimensions of curriculum transformation, which can be examined in depth through existing scholarly works, curriculum policy documents, and historical accounts. Compared to survey or

experimental approaches, a literature-based method allows for the synthesis of diverse sources to identify patterns, theoretical implications, and political contexts that cannot be captured through a single empirical dataset (Bowen, 2009).

The primary sources include official curriculum documents for Liberal Studies (2009–2020) and Citizenship and Social Development (2021–2024) published by the Hong Kong Education Bureau, as well as policy guidelines and teacher training materials. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals such as the *Journal of Moral Education*, *Oxford Review of Education*, and *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*. The literature was selected based on the following criteria: (1) direct relevance to civic education in Hong Kong; (2) publication in indexed journals or by credible academic publishers; (3) empirical or theoretical contributions to understanding curriculum reform; and (4) publication date between 2005 and 2024 to capture both pre- and post-CSD developments.

The analysis employed thematic content analysis, focusing on three dimensions: (1) narrative framing of citizenship and national identity, (2) ideological orientation of curriculum content, and (3) pedagogical approach and learning activities. Coding categories were developed deductively from critical education theory Giroux (2020) and inductively from the data. Data triangulation was achieved by cross-checking interpretations across curriculum documents, scholarly analyses, and prior interview-based studies to ensure consistency of findings.

To maintain objectivity, all sources were systematically recorded with full bibliographic details, and interpretations were compared with multiple scholarly perspectives, including those supportive and critical of the CSD curriculum. Researcher bias was minimized by employing peer debriefing, where interpretations were discussed with other academics familiar with Hong Kong's education policy. Member-checking was simulated by comparing analytical themes with findings from previous qualitative studies on student and teacher perceptions (Lo et al., 2023). This multi-step process strengthens the reliability of conclusions and ensures that interpretations reflect the broader academic discourse rather than the researcher's personal stance.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the Citizenship and Social Development (CSD) curriculum documents issued by the Hong Kong Education Bureau (2021) reveals a substantial restructuring of content and learning objectives when compared to the former Liberal Studies framework. Under Liberal Studies, students were required to complete independent inquiry projects, which involved formulating research questions, gathering data from diverse sources, and presenting findings in both written and oral formats. These projects fostered engagement with controversial

issues, encouraged evidence-based reasoning, and provided an authentic platform for democratic dialogue (Fung & Liang, 2018). In the CSD framework, however, such elements are absent. The independent inquiry component has been replaced with standardized thematic modules, such as “understanding the Constitution and Basic Law” and “appreciating the country’s development,” which are delivered in a predominantly lecture-based format. This shift is explicitly justified in the CSD Curriculum Guide by the need to “strengthen national identity” and “promote harmony and stability” (Education Bureau, 2021), p. 3), indicating a deliberate move away from student-led, critical exploration toward a state-directed, didactic approach.

The narrowing of thematic scope is also evident in the treatment of global issues. In Liberal Studies, global topics such as climate change, income inequality, and human rights were discussed in ways that connected them to Hong Kong’s local context and governance debates. In CSD, these topics are reframed to emphasize China’s role and contributions in addressing global challenges, often omitting critical perspectives or controversies. For example, discussions on international relations are now framed through a “patriotic diplomacy” lens, highlighting China’s achievements while avoiding debates over contentious policies. Hui Li (2021) identifies this as an “ideological reframing” of curriculum content, wherein the same thematic categories are retained but stripped of pluralistic viewpoints. This aligns with Morris and Vickers’ (2015) historical observation that national education reforms in Hong Kong have repeatedly been used as vehicles for shaping a singular identity aligned with central government narratives.

Teachers’ experiences under CSD reflect significant constraints on professional autonomy. According to survey findings reported by Zhao, Kennedy, and Wang (2024), 68% of teachers indicated a loss of discretion in selecting teaching materials, with many citing explicit directives to avoid politically sensitive topics. These directives extend beyond formal guidelines, as informal warnings and peer monitoring further discourage deviation from the official syllabus. One teacher interviewed by Lo et al. (2023) remarked, “We are told to be neutral, but neutrality here means following the official line.” This statement encapsulates what Bray and Koo (2005) describe as “pseudo-autonomy,” where educators appear to have freedom in pedagogy but are in practice bound by narrow ideological parameters. Students’ responses to CSD reveal a spectrum of reactions shaped by socioeconomic background, media access, and prior exposure to pluralistic learning. Lo et al. (2023) found that students from higher-income families or those with access to international news outlets were more likely to question or reinterpret the official content. For instance, while some students accepted the curriculum as a source of clear guidance on civic identity, others described it as “limiting” and “repetitive” (Li, 2021). These differences suggest that students’ civic orientations are influenced

not solely by school-based instruction but also by broader information ecosystems and family discourses.

The presence of student agency within this constrained educational context supports Goodman et al.'s (2011) argument that learners in authoritarian systems can develop "micro-resistances" through selective engagement, reinterpretation of content, or non-compliance with expected rhetorical positions. In Hong Kong, such agency may take the form of students fulfilling formal assessment requirements while privately holding alternative views, or introducing counter-narratives during class discussions in ways that avoid explicit confrontation. These subtle strategies indicate that even a heavily centralized curriculum cannot fully determine student thought.

From an analytical standpoint, these findings exemplify Mok's (2005) thesis that authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes use curricula as instruments of political stability, prioritizing cohesion over dissent. The removal of controversial topics, coupled with the emphasis on loyalty and national identity, reflects what Fairbrother and Kennedy (2011) term "moral nation-building." This process frames citizenship not as an active, participatory role requiring debate and deliberation, but as a status defined by allegiance to the state and adherence to prescribed values.

The pedagogical consequences of this shift are profound. By eliminating independent inquiry and open discussion, CSD diminishes opportunities for students to develop competencies in argumentation, evidence evaluation, and cross-cultural dialogue skills identified by Kerr (1999) as central to effective civic education. Evagorou, Vrikki, and Papanastasiou (2023) describe such curriculum changes as "decontextualization," where learning becomes abstracted from real-world political life. In practice, this means students are encouraged to produce "safe" responses that align with official narratives, rather than critically examining the complexities of governance and social issues.

A cross-national comparison underscores the degree of this divergence. In Canada, civic education programs are explicitly designed to promote discussion of controversial issues, encouraging students to consider multiple perspectives and develop informed positions (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Similarly, Finland's civic education, as studied by Huttunen (2025) and Tammi (2013), emphasizes long-term deliberative practices in which students and teachers collaboratively explore complex social questions without predetermined conclusions. These models treat disagreement and debate as essential to democratic learning, in stark contrast to the tightly bounded discourse permitted under CSD.

While such international comparisons are informative, they also highlight the difficulty of transplanting democratic pedagogies into hybrid regimes like Hong Kong. The structural limitations imposed by political authority fundamentally alter the scope and nature of classroom dialogue. Education Bureau documents present

national identity as a non-negotiable foundation of civic learning, with minimal space for pluralism (Government of the HKSAR Education Bureau, 2021). This approach stands in opposition to the deliberative ideals outlined by Kerr (1999), which view civic education as a means of preparing citizens to navigate diversity and disagreement.

The loss of civic education's deliberative function in Hong Kong is thus both structural and intentional. Structurally, the curriculum design removes participatory platforms such as project-based assessments; intentionally, policy rhetoric frames these changes as necessary for fostering unity and stability. The CSD Curriculum Guide explicitly states the goal of "enhancing students' sense of belonging to the country" (Education Bureau, 2021, p. 4), leaving little ambiguity about its nation-building objectives.

Theoretically, this transformation aligns with Giroux's (2020) critique that education in semi-authoritarian contexts is reoriented from an emancipatory space into an apparatus for reproducing dominant ideology. Althusser's (1971) concept of schools as ideological state apparatuses is clearly reflected in CSD's emphasis on loyalty and national pride, delivered through a curriculum that appears neutral but is politically embedded.

Yet, as Ng and Lai (2011) and Chan and Tang (2019) remind us, agency persists even in restricted contexts. Teachers may find ways to insert reflective questions or draw on unofficial materials to broaden discussions, while students might engage in "coded" discourse that challenges official narratives without overtly violating school rules. This dynamic creates what Chan and Tang (2019) describe as "citizenship in tension," where state-imposed narratives coexist with alternative interpretations in the lived experiences of learners.

In conclusion, the shift from Liberal Studies to CSD illustrates a calculated repoliticization of civic education in Hong Kong, aligning its structure and content with the ideological priorities of the state. Although the curriculum has effectively reduced opportunities for deliberation and critical engagement, it has not fully extinguished the potential for student and teacher agency. Civic education in this hybrid regime remains a contested terrain, simultaneously serving as a mechanism of political control and a space albeit limited for negotiating and reinterpreting civic identity. These findings contribute to broader discussions in critical citizenship education, suggesting that even under restrictive political conditions, education can retain pockets of reflexivity and contestation.

Conclusion

The transformation of Hong Kong's citizenship curriculum from Liberal Studies to Citizenship and Social Development (CSD) reflects a deliberate repoliticization of education, replacing critical and reflective pedagogy with a state-

directed approach centered on national loyalty and reduced participatory space. While these changes align with the function of education as an ideological state apparatus in semi-authoritarian regimes, the findings reveal that students are not entirely passive, showing symbolic agency through subtle resistance and reinterpretation of official narratives. This dynamic underscores the theoretical significance of understanding civic education as a contested arena where state control coexists with limited opportunities for critical engagement. Practically, it highlights the need for curriculum design that balances national identity formation with the cultivation of critical thinking skills, while future research could employ empirical classroom-based studies and cross-national comparisons to further explore how micro-resistance strategies emerge and operate in politically constrained educational contexts.

Suggestion

Governments and education policymakers, particularly in closed or hybrid political systems such as Hong Kong, should ensure that civic education serves not only as a vehicle for national identity formation but also as a democratic and reflective learning space that encourages critical thinking, open dialogue, and diverse perspectives. Teachers must be granted greater professional autonomy to exercise pedagogical judgment without political pressure, while participatory policy evaluation should involve the voices of educators, students, and civil society. Such measures are essential to safeguard academic freedom and sustain civic education as a means of nurturing active, informed, and critically engaged citizens.

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