

How an advocacy NGO can contribute to political socialization? : A case study in HK

Abstract

This article was written based on a case study done to a Hong Kong advocacy non-government organization (NGO) that has worked as a civic educator. Civic education programs of the NGO were observed. In-depth interviews were carried out both with the personnel of the NGO. The participants of the programs were interviewed and questionnaires were conducted to study the impact of the programs. This article discusses the changing nature of political socialization and explores, with the help of a case study in Hong Kong, how an advocacy NGO may contribute to political socialization by serving as a civic educator. It is hoped that this work can contribute to the literature about the possible role of advocacy NGOs in political socialization, particularly in augmenting other social institutions that are also active in this realm like schools and churches.

Keywords: Advocacy NGO, civic education, political socialization, Hong Kong

Introduction

Political socialization is a contested concept and can mean very different things in different political systems in terms both of content and methods. Even for the same polity, the concept of political socialization can vary at different points of time.

Notwithstanding this, political socialization remains an important task in every political system as younger generations are expected to play an active role in social and political participation nowadays. Many agents are involved in political socialization and non-government organizations (NGOs) are emerging as an actor in the process, particularly as the scope and meaning of political socialization has now been expanded. This article discusses the changing nature of political socialization and explores, with the help of a case study in Hong Kong, how an advocacy NGO may contribute to political socialization by serving as a civic educator. It is hoped that this work can contribute to the literature about the possible role of advocacy NGOs in such matters as civic education and political socialization.

Political socialization

Flanagan and Gally (1995) defined political socialization as an umbrella term covering those practices whereby youngsters are incorporated into the polity as full members. Underneath this generic term however there has been a shift of focus, a difference between the new and the old.

Child (1954) defined socialization as “the whole process by which an individual, born with behavioral potentialities of enormously wide range, is led to develop actual

behavior which is confined within a much narrower range- the range of what is customary and acceptable to the standards of the group.” It is easy to discern the conformist, passive and adult-dominated nature of this earlier definition. Likewise, and particularly from an authority perspective, Lewis (1961) considered that political socialization refers to the learning of politically relevant social patterns corresponding to societal positions as mediated through different agents of the society. In this view, marginalized groups could be particularly at risk as the definition was constructed on the assumption of an authoritative power structure.

The meaning of political socialization has gradually changed in the literature.

Flanagan and Sherrod (1998) supported the notion of political socialization as a life-long process as suggested by Niemi and Sobieszek (1977), and also indicated that young people actually play an active, evaluative role in negotiating political realities of their social order. This active learner notion, in stark contrast with the passivity and adult domination assumption in traditional definitions, is also found in Torney-Purta (1995) and many other prominent works in the field. In fact, even Flanagan and Gally (1995) pointed out that the concept of political socialization should change. It should move away from being the sole concern of formal politics and party loyalty transmission etc. to embrace more youngster- relevant topics relating to civic competence and social responsibilities. Warleign (2001) defined political socialization as learning to adapt to the political system in which one live which can be achieved through formal education, participation, and experience.

In general, current literature suggests that political socialization in the new era should:

- transcend the confines of formal politics, like party loyalty and voting behaviors, to embrace broader youth-relevant topics, such as social and political issues of a controversial nature, to enhance their civic efficacy.
- present to learners, not necessarily children, challenging context to experience, reflect, argue, negotiate, and judge by themselves contentious issues, as these are important for them to fit into a polity where plurality and democracy are cherished.

Agents of Political Change including NGOs

Greenstein (1968) pointed out that political socialization can be conceived either narrowly as civic lessons in schools or broadly as political learning of any sort. This definition suggests schools are simply one of the agents in the political socialization process. A brief discussion of the more important agents follows.

Family has long been considered as an important agent in political socialization. However, the simple notion of young ones being passive recipients of parental political attitudes and choices has already been modified. Ventura (2001), for example, argued that offspring acquire from parents political cues in the form of political labels. Cross and Young (2008) pointed out that parental influence is found but it only results in young ones with partisan parents being more resistant to the societal push away from partisan activism. Austin and Pinkleton (2001) even suggested that paradoxically, negativity of the parents can drive them to discuss politics with children, resulting in increased political awareness of the children. The uncertainty in outcome relating to

parent-child dialogue or conversation has also been emphasized (Ribak, 1997; McDevitt, 2005). The active, constructivist notion that youths are active seekers of meaning is assumed by these commentators.

Schools as socializing agents have also received much attention in the literature. Once again the mechanical “passing on” explanation of traditional socialization thinking is not upheld. Perliger (2006) argued that a democratic class atmosphere has a crucial impact on the internalization of democratic attributes. Carlehen (2006) explained that teaching is a form of political socialization but schools should take up a radicalized understanding of democratic citizenship as its normative foundation and students should be taught the art of argumentation. The focus, as can be seen, is not limited to studying formal politics of the adult world which the students will not encounter. Hooghe (2004) suggested that schools matter but not just because of the inclusion of civic education into the curriculum, but also because they encourage students to become informed and engaged in participation. McFairland and Thomas (2006) argued for schools to provide more clubs etc of a political nature to their students as this may encourage political participation. Once again, we can see the active role of young people in learning has been emphasized. [Leung and Yuen \(2009\) and Yuen and Leung \(2010\)](#) explained how students can learn when being engaged as partners in school governance [and participated as ‘here and now’ citizens.](#)

The discussion of NGOs as agents of political socialization has gradually emerged in the literature as the importance accorded to civil society in the building up of democracy has increased (De Tocqueville, 1981; Putnam et al., 1993). Mercier (2002) explained that NGOs are increasingly involving themselves in discussion about civil

society, democracy, good governance and social capital, although often from a Western perspective. However NGOs present both strengths and limitations in bolstering democracy. NGOs can buttress democracy by acting as a check and balance against state power because of their autonomous status and grassroots connection. On the other hand, NGOs are dismissed by many as having “personalized rule”, “focusing on service rather than on political activities”, and “being middle class and urban biased”.

Cross and Young (2008) extending work by Inglehart (1990) and Nevitte (1996) indicated that advocacy groups might have superseded political parties in appealing to youths. Flanagan et al. (1998) attributed the rise of public interest to student solidarity experienced in schools, positive family values, as well as voluntary work. As a lot of voluntary work for youth is organized by NGOs, NGOs become an important form of institutional affiliation and connection to community (Flanagan et al. 1998). NGOs are often mentioned in the literature when voluntary work and political campaigning are considered important ways of political socialization, especially the literature about NGOs as a means for youths to gain experience through voluntary work (Rosenthal, Feiring and Lewis, 1998; Yates and Younis; 1998; Roker, Player and Coleman; 1999).

Many scholars argue for NGOs’ assuming a civic education mission. Edwards (2000) argued that in the era of globalization, marked by weakening both of state and workers’ rights, NGOs have a major role to play in helping people change from using power to advance selfish interests to facilitating the self development of all, not only through their educational programs, but from constituency building, and their own organizational praxis. Albom (2004) pointed out that since 1980s more NGOs have become involved in advocacy, lobbying and civic education. Leung (2006) considered

NGOs as agents of civic education that can help students to reconstruct meaning over social issues. The Council of Europe has recently made a very strong claim that NGOs are important in civic education for democratic citizenship. They can lobby governments in order to influence formal education at all levels, then work directly to educate people in the democratic life. (Council of Europe, n.d.)

Some NGOs are already actively providing civic education programs. Finkel (2003) realized the importance of NGOs as civic educators. Though admitting fear that some of these groups might be “taking sides” and “promoting distrust” because of their strong advocacy orientation, it was suggested that advocacy NGOs should be supported to provide civic education to the youth given that they are pro-democratic in nature. (Finkel, 2003; Leung, 2003, 2006) Notwithstanding these studies, how NGOs could provide civic education programs and the impact such works could bring is still a matter where research is needed. This is an area literature may need to address and a gap this article is aiming to help close.

Research Design

This study aims to address the following research questions:

- (1) How can an advocacy NGO work as an agent of political socialization by providing civic education programs?
- (2) What are some of the possible impacts of the civic education programs provided by the NGO?

In addressing the research questions, this study illustrates how an advocacy NGO worked as an agent of political socialization through providing programs of a civic

education nature and to secondary students and seminary students in the summer of 2009. It is hoped that this study can fill a gap in the literature on how advocacy NGOs can play an active part in political socialization particularly as in Hong Kong and other societies internationally advocacy NGOs are now playing an increasingly important role in civic education whilst studies and research findings remain at best scanty.

Sampling

Purposive sampling was used in this case study. An active advocacy NGO Hong Kong Christian Cooperation (HKCC) was chosen as our target for study.¹ This NGO was purposively chosen because it is a NGO with distinct features that fit the criteria of the present study, namely being both politically vocal, and active in promoting its cause through organizing activities of a civic education nature.

Data Collection

Using a case study approach, the research team, comprising of two researchers and two part-time research assistants followed the activities of HKCC intensively in the summer of 2009. Data collection took place mainly from June to September 2009, which was a peak season for the HKCC as far as civic education activities were concerned. Data were collected from two educational programs, a seminary student summer program meant for adult seminary students, and a youth camp for secondary students (hereafter called the Poverty Camp) meant for secondary students. These programs are to be detailed later. These activities were closely followed by the research team which took mainly an observer role. Occasionally a participant role was assumed. For example the team was invited to help design the evaluation

questionnaire for the Poverty Camp. In-depth interviews were conducted with the executive officer and program organizers of HKCC to explore the aims, objectives and rationales of the NGO and the activities to be observed. Two focus group interviews and 6 individual interviews were conducted with the participants of the seminary student summer program. Observation reports were written and, in the case of the Poverty Camp, evaluation questionnaires were also administered to collect pertinent data. Relevant documents, comprising the promotion leaflets of the programs, information available in the NGO's webpage, and yearbooks of the HKCC etc were also analyzed.

Data analysis

Whilst the evaluation questionnaires provided some quantitative data from responses of the participants of the Poverty Camp, this study draws its data mainly from observation and interviews. We paid strong emphasis on the qualitative data. In analyzing the qualitative data, the researchers adopted a method that shared some of the attributes Glaser and Strauss (1967) described as 'constant comparative method'. Observation reports and interview records were studied and incidents were compared and contrasted so as to identify emerging patterns. The aim of the researchers was to generate theories rather than to validate certain hypotheses. The research team as a whole studied all the qualitative data collected together and made joint decisions with regard to coding, patterns and data saturation etc. These helped to avoid excessive subjectivity in inference.

Findings and Discussion

Background of HKCC

HKCC was founded in 1998 when 120 individual Christians came together to form an ecumenical Christian NGO out of concerns about the future of Hong Kong, and the need to promote social awareness and active political participation. There was a strongly felt need to organize the association because many churches did not take

the risk of getting involved in social and political issues. The political stance of HKCC can best be summarized in its motto: *Uniting to build a free, democratic and just society*. There is an interesting conjunction between the role HKCC has decided to take up and the role Edwards (2000) advised NGOs to play in the 21st century: reshaping the heart of the people to effect positive social change. Both HKCC and Edwards (2000) believed that traditional religious bodies were not doing enough to facilitate improvement in the social realm due to an over-emphasis on spiritual work. Functions of HKCC are listed as:

- To assist Christians to reflect on the Christian faith and to act upon it.
- To be a forum for Christians to share their views and a base for putting their faith into practice.
- To be a think-tank to search for directions in mission for Churches and Christians and to develop a contextual theology in Hong Kong.
- To be a resource center to interpret the Hong Kong situation to overseas Christians and to introduce ecumenical activities and thinking to local Christians.
- To be a symbol of the continuing quest for human rights, democracy and justice.

The issues currently concerning HKCC are globalization, democracy, human rights, sexuality and gender, and peace. HKCC advances its cause through both political campaigning and working with educational activities of a civic education nature. It is on the latter that the present study is focused.

As discussed earlier, political socialization has now shifted in focus from mechanically passing on political values and norms to empowering young people to

become active critical learners, negotiating and constructing meaning whilst trying to adapt to a changing world, and being willing to effect positive social changes.

Responding to the two research questions above, the following sections explore (1) how HKCC contributes to political socialization of youth and adults by organizing civic education programs (2) the impacts of such programs have on the participants.

NGOs as an agent of political socialization

In this study, HKCC worked was observed to work as an agent of political socialization by organizing two educational programs. The first one was a Poverty Camp for secondary school students and the second one is a summer program for adult seminary students.

Poverty Camp

Acting under the aegis of the Alliance of Civic Education, HKCC organized a 3-day education camp with the help of other NGOs for 30 senior secondary students in early July. The camp, known as Poverty Camp, aimed at helping students to understand from economic, political, social, and legal perspectives how in the society some groups are marginalized and have to live under unfavorable condition. Through simulated experiences and experiential learning, students were required to explore possible changes required to bring about a more equitable society.

In the first day, students initially took part in simulation games that helped them grasp such concepts as government, citizenship, equality, freedom, poverty and social justice. The games provided basic information and the students played different marginalized groups (such as new immigrants, the poor, old unskilled workers etc). Students then reflected and discussed the plight of these groups from social and

political perspectives. Tutors from the supporting NGOs acted as facilitators.

The second day of the camp was the climax. Students were required to pay group visits to associations working for marginalized groups: grassroots, racial and sexual minorities, new immigrants etc. Consequently, the students experienced real dialogue with the marginalized groups. For example, in one of the visits, the students met with political refugees in an organization that offers assistance to political asylum seekers. The students were briefed about government policies and problems relating to political refugees. Then the students talked freely with a former political refugee who shared with them his personal experience in Hong Kong, including all the discrimination and misunderstanding he had to face.

This was followed in the evening by theatrical plays in which students shared and reviewed their visit experience. The students spent the last day critically reflecting on their new experience ([Hatcher & Bringle, 1997](#)). They related such experience to the concepts they had learned and discussed about how they could help to build a living environment friendly to the disadvantaged. The critical reflection is crucial in helping the students to consolidate what they have experienced in the simulation and real context and construct their understandings of poverty and related concepts.

Seminary student summer program

HKCC helped organize the summer program under the aegis of the Hong Kong Christian Council. The program pitched at adult seminary students and lasted for two months. For the seminary students, the program was recognized as an internship program. According to the promotion leaflet, the course aimed at arranging a challenging context for experiential learning. Participants would reflect on the relationship between Christianity and social justice; and examine the meaning and the

role of church in the social and political development in the Hong Kong context. The participants were expected to develop a broadened understanding and concern about the Bible and ecumenicalism. In the interview, the coordinator of HKCC explained that the program could help arouse an interest in social care and concern among future preachers and office bearers in the church, which can be a neglected element because of the exclusive concern for spiritual growth.

The program comprised a number of talks conducted at HKCC with invited speakers, covering the social role and mission of churches and Christians. Seminars were conducted on the following topics: “Gospel and the Contemporary World”; “Church and Globalization”; “Spirituality and Resistance”; “Spirituality and Social Concern”, and “Pastoral Care and Marginalized Groups” etc. The talks and seminars aimed at encouraging participants to transcend the spiritual domain to acquire both a sense of social mission and a willingness to undertake social commitment and action. In addition, participants were required to visit associations working for the marginalized groups: homosexuals; low-skill labor; the poor etc. In these visits, they had real contact and dialogues with these groups and could better understand their perspective and problems. The participants also participated in a prayer meeting involving both Catholics and Protestants in support of the July 1st Democracy Parade. Some of them participated in the rally to support residents of Choi Yuen Village² who were to be evicted from their land for constructing a railway depot. Participants also worked on group projects aiming at analyzing the problems relating to different socially under-privileged groups.

This seminary student program differed significantly from the Poverty Camp reported above in three ways. First, this was an adult education program. The 9 participants were more mature both in terms of age (ranging from early 20s to mid

This is the pre-published version.

30s) and working experience (many of them had full time working experience before). The seminary students were actually being trained to take up preaching and leadership jobs in church and hence could be working with socialization situations themselves in the future. Second, this program project was much longer and intensive than the Poverty Camp. From the interviews, the seminar students were clear about their rationales for joining the program, particularly in relation to transcending their own limitations and reflecting upon the social role of church.

Taking up social concerns and action, particularly at the frontline and even of a campaigning nature, is totally new to me. That's why I came. I want to learn something I hadn't touched upon before. The church does help people but only on a personal basis...like pastoral care and occasionally giving out rice (to the needy)...but seldom takes up issues from a social perspective.

I wanted to join this program because I want to get experience of social concern and action. If you stay within the church, you won't get such social participation...neither did I have any when I studied in school.

Impacts on the Participants

Enhancement of social awareness and attitudinal change

It seems that all secondary students in the Poverty Camp had become more socially aware of poverty in general. All reported that the simulation games (playing such roles as the under-privileged) and the related discussions did allow them to understand the plight of the underprivileged. One student wrote:

Now I realize that illegal workers are really that helpless. Their

employers abused them and used them as dispensable tools...When they have worked for some time, and the pay day is nearing, the employer will report them to the police and they will be caught and can't get a single cent.

Another student expressed:

I can see there is discrimination in terms of age, race and sex.

It seems that the real encounters in the visits had more impact on the students. After visiting an organization helping political asylum seekers, all the students expressed increased understanding of the problems the political refugees encountered, and some admitted they had misunderstanding before. One student expressed: "Before, I mistook that these people as simply tourists". Another put down:

Now I know those African (refugees) did not come from forest and they can be very friendly too.

The interview findings were supported by the findings from the open remarks on "what have they learned from the camp?" of the overall evaluation form they completed at the end of the camp. All students indicated that they gained exposure to the poverty problem that exists in their society. More than 70% of the students started to think of the problem from a social and political perspective, and came to think that the social system or government policies may be to blame. Some examples are given below.

The experience helped me understand more about different classes that make up the society.

The society is offering not enough help to these poor people and we need better social welfare policies from the government.

There is injustice in the society especially now capitalism allows the employers to be very harsh to the workers.

There are wrong beliefs passed down the generations in the society, breeding misunderstanding against marginalized groups.

In general the influence on attitude was positive. A few students reported that they would like to give a helping hand, implying a change of attitude:

I will pay more attention to social issues in the future and try to understand the needs of different people. If possible I will help these needy people.

I have received a new way to understand the problem of refugees. I will accept them and try to help them when I can.

I will try to talk with these foreign people and will not disregard and discriminate against them.

The interview findings were also supported by the remarks students left in the overall evaluation form. Two thirds of the students expressed empathy and possible change of behavior, implying a possible change in attitudes:

I will support minorities more so that they can fight for their rights and I will take up a social perspective in support of the principle of equality of rights.

I will take a more favorable attitude toward the street cleaners.

I will reassess the society and will be more concerned about the plight of marginalized groups.

Similarly, positive impacts were observed among the participants of the seminary student program. After visiting and discussing with the people in Choi Yuen Village, some took part in a rally in support of the Choi Yuen villagers. A participant commented after studying the Choi Yuen village incident:

Before, I would easily dismiss such cases as I would simply accept the policy and the rationales given...This time, wow..., particularly after discussing the issue and visiting the place, I realize there can be so many complications behind a policy.

Another participant also described that it was the first time he joined a procession and shouted slogans and he expressed to have obtained a sense of participation and influence. Active participation in this case may have an impact on civic competence, which comprises knowledge as well as skills and efficacy.

Signs of resistance, negotiation and compromise

Notwithstanding the altruistic ideas and behaviors reported above, some participants of the Poverty Camp, according to the feedback they gave in the evaluation questionnaire, remained apathetic, aloof; or even expressed self-protecting ideas when the plight of poverty was brought in front of their own eyes. More than half of the students expressed in the questionnaires that as injustice can be done to the under-privileged, the most important thing is not to help but to avoid falling into such socially disadvantaged categories by climbing up the social ladder, say through study. Understanding the existence of social problem but trying first not to correct it but to

stay in a more advantageous position may be a sign of compromise. Certainly this can be a rational response particularly when there is a lack of efficacy in front of the status quo.

In order not to become one of them, I will work hard toward high academic credentials as this is the best way to avoid such plights and to be able to live a good life.

I will study harder to add value to myself. I will try not to become just a worker.

Cases of resistance (Fairbrother, 2003) were also observed amongst the participants in the seminary student program. They were adult learners holding strong values and beliefs and might perceive the socializing force as contradictory and threatening to their values. An example could be found in a visit to a gay centre. The centre executive and members talked about how gays are being marginalized and oppressed both in church and in society. They articulated their interpretation of the Bible with regard to sexuality, which is highly controversial as local churches have dodged the homosexual issue and gays usually meet with strong disapproval. As the gay centre executive put it, “My greatest despair is that within the church, according to their interpretation of the Bible, there is no sign of salvation for me!”

In the gay centre visit, the participants spoke, asked and commented far less, as compared to another visit to a centre serving poor families living on public assistance, in which they appeared much more vocal, empathetic and more ready to question the society and the welfare policies of the government. Some of them expressed their resistance:

I have reservations about their way of construing the Bible...that homosexuality was condemned in the past due to the then backward state of technology and that condoms etc have now redefined right and wrong ... It is problematic!

I can't stand the promiscuous and easy style one of their members claimed...That's wrong.

However, it could be observed that despite the initial resistance, even the more conservative participants became more willing to listen to the contrary view as expressed by the gays. It seems that there was a negotiating process going on between the participants and the socializing agent ending at more compromising views (Leung, 2006). This is exemplified by the following quote from a female participant, aged 30s, who remained silent during the visit.

You know that was the first time I have been in close contact with gays... Before they appeared a far-off group... I don't know what to ask...and there is the issue of promiscuity ... Did you see the two books written in Thai in their shelves?...I saw pornographic pictures there...But from now on I think I am willing to listen to what they say and be open-minded... We (the participants) did talk about them (the gays) after the visit and we discussed what they said about the inborn nature of being gay and reflected against the "homosexuality as sin" notion we used to believe.

She continued to say:

In my future pastoral care work, I will not reject church members who are homosexual but will talk with them about their views and problems though I still believe this is against the design God created us...But, you know they may be more comfortable in a church of their kind where the

like-minded stick together...This also happens in churches when economic class seems important in affecting the members they recruit.

So a contrary view that would never have been attended to before was finally given some consideration, implying a slight attitudinal change, not necessarily to accepting new perspective but to willingness to listen to other perspectives. Another participant explained that it would be difficult for his conservative church to take up a more open attitude to homosexuality now. However, as he is in charge of library of the church, he would start ordering books of a more liberal nature to effect gradual changes.

Sustainability of the impacts

Whether short-term programs can only yield results that do not last is always a meaningful question to ask. The present study can't prove anything as that would require longitudinal studies. There are however points to note from findings of this study. For the Poverty Camp, the evaluation questionnaire asked students to indicate whether in the future they would like to know more about the marginalized groups and to participate in activities relating to these groups. Apart from one blank and one negative response, all students indicated they were willing to learn more about marginalized groups in the future. However, in terms of future participation, the picture is less promising as slightly more than one half of those who showed willingness to learn more indicated they are unwilling to partake in forthcoming activities. From the conversation with the students, the pressure of tests and examinations that comes along once schools resume may be a deterring factor.

On the other hand, as for the seminary student program, past participants did turn

up occasionally to show support, and the possibility of forming an alumnus to facilitate future sharing on social issues was discussed. The research team's impression from both the observations and the conversation with the seminary students was that they are willing to start reflecting on controversial issues as answers to such questions will be important in their future career in working for the church. Many of them also indicated that the camp just marked a beginning.

Conclusion

As discussed before there is increased awareness about the role advocacy NGOs can play in political socialization. In this case, HKCC, an active socially-concerned advocacy NGO, has illustrated that NGOs of such a nature may help as a civic educator in a number of ways as depicted below.

Facilitating learning

NGOs can arrange and mediate in social and political issue discussions to ensure that different viewpoints, including the marginalized and the more liberal perspectives, can be heard. Sometimes, to enrich discussion, NGOs might need to highlight points that otherwise would not be covered.

NGO workers can be free from the conservative tone school teachers are expected to take, so can voice out marginalized and liberal perspectives more easily. Interestingly, as remarked by the executive of HKCC, advocacy NGOs may have been taken as surrogate when schools or teachers want to speak on an issue but consider that too sensitive to be tackled by themselves.

The contribution of service learning and experiential learning was reported in the literature (Leung, 2004; Leung, 2006; Yates & Younis, 1998; Lacey & Ilcan, 2006).

NGOs, given their connection with the social fabrics, are well-positioned to arrange such learning experience. It was observed in this study that the learning the NGO arranged, with the real encounter with the formerly far-off groups and social problems, did allow and support the participants to negotiate and construct their own meanings in the learning process.

Locating social topics to study and arranging venues of learning

Advocacy NGOs followed social and political issues closely and are thus in a good position to locate contentious issues for students to study. The Choi Yuen Village incident in our case is a good example. The secondary students who took part in the Poverty Camp told us that the visit to the service centre helping political asylum seekers would not be possible without the camp because their schools could only arrange them to visit “safe places” like elderly homes. They also pointed out that they didn’t think their teachers would know of such a place to visit either.

Providing opportunities of political participation and campaigning

Political participation and campaigning can enhance civic competence effectively and in our case was much treasured by the participants. These can be more conveniently organized by advocacy NGOs, not just because of their mission and involvement in civil society, but also because of the fact that schools often need to do everything to make themselves politically neutral and hence promoting political participation and campaigning often becomes a taboo.

Networking and pulling up social resources

This represents another advantage advocacy NGOs enjoyed in working as a civic educator. In our study HKCC could join hands with different NGOs in order to pull up human and social resources to make the programs a success. Such collaboration can be very rewarding in arranging experiential learning. This may also help avoid a situation in which a single NGO can dictate the content of the learning. This could be important considering advocacy NGOs can carry their own strongly held beliefs and there is a concern about the possibility of bias.

Providing a conducive environment to learn about controversial and political issues

For social and political learning to take place a supportive environment is important. The school context, with all the built-in authority, conservative ethos, and pressure of examination etc., may not always be effective as a platform to discuss issues of a contradictory nature. On the other hand, the voluntary, friendly, and often informal setting of NGOs, as observed in our case, may be more encouraging in terms of political discussion.

All these suggest that advocacy NGOs can provide a challenging context for youth to experience, reflect, argue, and judge contentious issues to enable them to fit into a polity marked by plurality and civic competence.

The programs HKCC offered often touched upon politics and public policies. These were areas that schools as an agent of political socialization had traditionally under-provided (Tse 1997; Leung & Ng, 2004). It seems that there can be an alliance between advocacy NGOs and schools in the provision of civic and political education.

Such cooperation would need to be explored. The executive of HKCC, when interviewed, commented that a tie with schools usually works out when there is a friendly teacher, who understands their work, to act as a middleman. Usually topics like globalization (which is less politically sensitive) can be a starting point. The advocacy NGO then can support schools by the provision of reference materials and the conducting of talk and seminars.

It is true that it can't be ruled out that some schools are suspicious of advocacy NGOs because of their liberal attitudes. In fact response to the evaluation form by students joining the Poverty Camp indicated that almost 90% of the students joined the camp either through encouragement by a friend or an individual enthusiastic teacher. The research team talked to a number of students joining the Poverty Camp after their visit and was told that their decision to join the camp was due to the encouragement of a respected school cleric who shows strong social concern. The schools didn't seem to be actively promoting such. The promotion and mobilization may require resources and a more institutionalized status. The difficulty the NGO encountered in promoting its work to schools etc. is in line with the comments made by Finkel (2003) and Leung (2003, 2006). Mouth-to-mouth promotion was also important in the recruitment drive of the summer program for seminary students. This personal networking works well if the target group is small but once the advocacy NGO tries to promote civic and political education on a massive scale,

We need to state that this is a single case study conducted in Hong Kong and as such any attempt to generalize, should only be done with the utmost caution, having regard to differences in cultural and social factors. Our study was done with a pro-democracy

advocacy NGO and the results should not be extended without discrimination to NGOs of a different nature. Neither should one jump to the conclusion that there is a “magic bullet” for NGO in its role in political socialization. Warleigh (2001) for example argued that the internal governance and resources of the NGOs will be important in their effectiveness. Finkel (2003)’s notion about government support to NGOs’ civic education look a reasonable proposal. However, this is not a must again. Warleigh (2001) highlighted the potential risk of NGOs being used by government to marginalize the sectors most disfavored, by promoting a bogus discourse of inclusion-via-NGOs. In fact, some NGO executives we got in touch in our study also complained about official funding of projects were more likely to be obtained by NGOs whose stance were more agreeable to the authority.

All in all, we sum up by saying that NGOs, as we observed in this case study, can potentially be an important actor in political socialization, particularly in filling the gap left by other agents of political socialization. More researches and studies need to be done if we are to understand and help advocacy NGOs to play their new role of being a civic educator in the society.

Endnotes

1. This is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the NGO.
2. Choi Yuen Village is a village in the New Territories that is about to be demolished

due to the government's decision to build a new rail link with China.

3. Choi Yuen village residents migrated to where their village is now after the British occupation of Hong Kong. They can't have equality of rights compared to the rights granted to those who lived in the New Territories before the British occupation, in terms of land security and inheritance.

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