To Be or Not To Be A Citizen: Young People Talks about Everyday Experiences of Citizenship in Malaysia

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Abstract: Citizenship is generally understood as an adult experience. Being young is seen as a transitional stage between ‘childhood’ and ‘adulthood’ where young people either learn about becoming adults or where they pass through certain ‘rites of passage’. This paper draws on some of the findings from a larger project on citizenship and citizenship education experiences among student teachers in multi-ethnic Malaysia. This article attempts to explore the citizenship experiences through the student teachers participation during the community service placement and their understanding of good citizens in multi-ethnic culture. It also intends to explore the young generations’ point of view as being citizens of Malaysia, such as their rights and duties, how they perceived good and bad citizenship and how they understand the language of citizenship. In the spirit of ethnographic design, twenty-eight multi-ethnic student teachers (year 2 and year 4) who enrolled into citizenship and citizenship education course in Sultan Idris Education University (SIEU) had been interviewed and observed at university and on placement. The data was analysed using a thematic analysis. The findings revealed that student teachers ‘lived citizenship’ marked comprehensive yet complex elements of citizenship. They have clear understandings of citizenship in ‘Malaysian way’ that point more towards communitarian than liberal or civic-republican citizenship paradigms. They drew clear distinctions between what it means to be a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ citizen. They also underlined how everyday understandings of citizenship can have both inclusionary and exclusionary implications. Further study need to be done as some of student teachers faced difficulty articulating their rights than their responsibilities.

Keywords: citizenship, citizenship education, lived citizenship, unheard voice, multi-ethnic

1. Introduction

Citizenship for the young is therefore experienced through certain transitions such as the school-to-work transition or moving from the family home to independent living (Jones & Wallace, 1992). Marshall (1950), referred that children and young people as ‘citizens in the making’ (Marshall, 1950, p. 25). Social policy also sees young people as a threat to the ‘healthy functioning of citizenship and democracy’ (Hart, 2009).

One common cultural characteristic reflected in citizenship education in Asian countries as observed by (Grossman, Lee & Kennedy, 2008) is their emphasis on moral education in citizenship curriculum. Kennedy in (Lee et al., 2004) pointed out that Asian citizenship education is characterized by conceptions of moral virtues and personal values. Lee et al. (2004) has identified this feature in terms of ‘relationalistic’ which emphasis in how one relates to self, others (such as family and friends), the state and nature.

In line with the national ideology and national educational policy in Malaysia, the civic mission in the formal curriculum aimed for social cohesion, unity and integration. (Bajunid, I., in Grossman et al. (2008) explained that contents and themes for citizenship and citizenship education at the primary level are care and love of self, loving the family, living together in school and society, knowing Malaysian culture, Malaysia as their homeland, readiness to face challenges, and a Citizenship Project Portfolio (students participation in community service). The secondary level themes are self-achievement/attainment, family relationships, community living, the multicultural heritage of Malaysia, Malaysia as a sovereign nation, future challenges and a Social Service Project (Grossman et al., 2008).

Many studies employing mainstream political definitions conclude that young people are largely disinterested in politics, disengaged from formal political activities and unlikely to participate in many future democratic processes (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). The study of young people and citizenship in Malaysia was no exception in positioning young people as citizens in need. Various bodies and councils are given the responsibilities to see to the needs of these young people. Efforts have been made to strengthen the management and implementation capacity of public sector agencies responsible for young people’s development. A study of social citizenship: Rights, participation and responsibilities of young people by Ahmad et al. (2012) emphasized on the importance of society to permeate a sense of citizenship in young generation and help them realize their role in a democratic society.

2. Methodology
This study was conducted using qualitative ethnographic design (Berg, 2004). A mix aged and gender of student teachers who enrolled into citizenship education course had been interviewed and observed at university and placement for data collection purpose. Ethnographic design is chosen to investigate their understandings, beliefs and values of citizenship in-depth. The researchers used observation, students’ journals and focus group interviews to obtain qualitative data. Using purposive sampling methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994) four ethnic group (Malays, Chinese, Indian, aborigines and eastern Malaysia indigenous group which represents the majority and the minority groups in Malaysia) were chosen as a respondent. The data was triangulate and analyzed using the thematic analyses (Creswell, 2009).

3. Findings

The analysis from the data showed that the everyday experience of citizenship of student teachers marked comprehensive yet complex elements of citizenship. The student teachers articulated this during the in-depth interviews and placement community service project. The brief matic discussion of the findings is below.

3.1. Integration and unity

Citizenship as a tool for unity and integration in a multi ethnic society was one of the themes which appeared when student teachers articulated the meaning of citizenship. At the very least, this reflected a view that against such a political and historical backdrop, being united as one Malaysian is important. Matthew, a non-Malay indigenous student believes that citizenship education taught on how to be a good citizen. Importantly, citizenship education also taught how to live together as a nation, how to live in harmony in a diverse society. Observing from her early response of citizenship experience in previous findings, Tommy identified a key important challenge to unity in multi-ethnic Malaysia which is intolerant and judgmental attitudes of the majority Malays towards others. He did compare this to the ethnic interrelation and integration in western Malaysia which is more harmonious and built on the respects and recognition values.

In general, Matthew expressed his satisfaction at being in a multi ethnic society but when it comes to recognition of the difference, the ‘one way respect’ as mentioned in the previous analysis may be disruptive. On the one hand, although the curriculum and educational policies seems to occupy the integration aspects, for Mathew it was very superficial when the notion of preferential citizenship practiced neglected some of the minority rights. Matthew added that citizenship education teachers should encourage the notion of mutual respect and recognition of the difference of multi-ethnic Malaysia.

3.2. Rights and duty

In general, for all the student teachers agree that the important key element in citizenship was rights and duty. Dina, Haris and Win believed that citizenship education taught about rights and responsibilities, about nation and nationhood. Understanding the rights given denotes duty to the state. Some of the students spoke on the reciprocity between rights given and the duty performed.

“It teaches us about rights and duties as a reciprocal relationship. If we think that the state owes rights to each of the citizens, we also have to think that we owe responsibilities to the state. It all about a two-ways relationship” (Dina, female, Malay). [Author’s translation].

Win, a female Malay student teacher, articulated that citizenship education is about participation in the community and it involves the relation between the state and citizens and also the relation with the community. Citizenship as part of the community and responsible to the community. Some student teachers stressed the importance of practicing the national ideology as part of the duty of the citizen.

According to one of the participant:

“It teach us about rights, inter-ethnic relations and the important thing which is to engage with the society. I would conclude that citizenship is about rights and duty and community engagement”. (Win, female, Malay) [Author’s translation].

Some of the student teachers itemize the rights and duties of the citizens in several items as family rights and duties.
“As a member of a family, I should get the basic needs, and love and care from my family and in return, I think I have to repay my parent by helping them when I am employed. Helping my brother and sister in their study part of my duty” (Aini, female, Malay) [Author’s translation].

On the other hand, Emilia detailed the rights and duties in the neighborhood aspect.

“As part of the neighborhood member, I think I should have a right to live in peace and harmony and keep a good relationship among the people of the neighborhood, helping each other and being aware on neighborhood security” (Emilia, female, indigenous) [Author’s translation].

Vicky emphasized on the rights of security and public safety and awareness of public safety, as below:

“I think the state have to guarantee the citizens’ public safety and security. We need to feel safe in this country, as a citizen our duty is help each other in the community to ensure our neighborhood is safe” (Vicky, Chinese, male). [Author’s translation].

3.3. Patriotism

Throughout the development of citizenship education in Malaysia, history education has played a vital role in instilling patriotism among the students. In the new Integrated Secondary School Curriculum which implemented in 1988, History has become a core subject which must be studied for five years; from Form 1 to Form 5. The History curriculum integrates three related themes such as patriotism, the contents of History, and the structure of History discipline (Grossman et al., 2008).

Key citizenship concepts in the curriculum which involve political and historical literacy simultaneously include ideas of citizen’s national and international rights, duties, obligations, entitlements and privileges. The patriotic component emphasizes the development of a citizen who is proud to be a Malaysian, who is loyal to the country, who has the spirit of belongingness; and who is disciplined, industrious and economically and culturally productive.

Jourdan conceptualized citizenship education as a subject that taught about patriotism and loyalty to the nation.

“It taught us about nation and nationhood, we have to know the history of our country, always be proud to be Malaysian and loyal to our Kings”. (Jourdan, Indigenous, male)” [Author’s translation].

3.4. Moral values

One common cultural characteristic reflected in citizenship education in Asian countries is their emphasis on moral education in the citizenship curriculum. Kennedy and Fairbrother (2004) point out that Asian citizenship education is characterized by conceptions of moral virtues and personal values. Lee (2004) has identified this feature in terms of the rationalistic emphasis on citizenship. When analyzing the development of citizenship curriculum in the cases of each country, it is not difficult to find civics-and-moral education are basically a twin package being promoted in the Asian countries (Lee et al., 2004).

Hamidah, Matthew and Syima believe that citizenship education should teach more on the noble and moral values. Mathew believes that doing a good deed such as helping others is part of citizenship education.

“Citizenship teaches how to be a moral person, teaches good values”, (Hamidah, female, Malay)” [Author’s translation].

3.5. Good citizens

Adopting Westheimer & Kahne, (2004) type of good citizenship, student teachers were asked the hypothetical case of what they think about a good citizens in Malaysia. In general student teachers agreed on all three type of citizens: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory and the justice oriented citizen. Nevertheless, most of the student teachers positioned themselves as personally responsible and participatory citizen but not as justice oriented citizens. Student teachers responded that personally responsible citizen should be an ultimate desire for young generation in order to build a healthy nation.
Meanwhile, Hamidah, Zalikha and Hazim stressed on the religious teaching as an important element to cultivate a good and a moral person. Most of the student teachers positioned themselves as a good and responsible citizen. They claim that they follow the rules and pay the utility bills consistently.

Some of them added a moral person as part of being a responsible citizen. They should be good to family members, peers, people in the same neighborhood and respect for others as part of being a responsible citizen. Student teachers in this study also have experienced engaging themselves in the community. Eddy, a male indigenous student teacher, who lived in a seasonal flood area in Eastern Malaysia commented that young people’s formed a voluntary group and they organized a flood campaign by providing foods and basic needs to help flood victims.

“It just like our duty as young people, each time the area was hit by a flash flood young people would arrange a group of participants to help the victims” (Eddy, indigenous, male) [Author’s translation].

Most of the student teachers has participate in a volunteer group in school and in a university club. Noraini, a female student teacher, saw volunteering is the best she could do as an unemployed person as she couldn’t contribute to fulfill the material needs. Some of the student teachers claimed that the active function of the community centre would help them a lot on the volunteering project.

3.6. Not ready to be a citizen

Student teachers in this study positioned themselves as ‘not ready’ to be a justice oriented citizen. It is clear from the student teachers’ personal experience that the adults saw them as immature and unemployed and thought their title as a ‘student’ should mean they focused on study. Some studies of young peoples and citizenship indicated employment as a major stepping stone into the adult world. Having a good income allows young people to gain access to independence through leaving the family home and setting up their own home (Jones & Wallace, 1992). Having paid work also gives them adult status within the local community as peers, friends and other adults see work as a major statement of adulthood (Hutson & Jenkins, 1989).

Waged employment is seen increasingly as the central citizenship obligation in modern industrialized society (Pateman 1989). Smith et.al (2005) explained that the waged-employment-oriented view of citizenship likewise masks young people’s social participation. As Jones and Wallace (1992) remark, ‘school work, helping in the home, even part-time paid work, are not recognized as work in our society and do not carry any rights’ (p. 22). Most of the student teachers experienced themselves as ‘second class citizens’ as they are not yet adult and do not carry any employment responsibilities like pay tax, voting and others duties. For this matter they think to be a justice oriented citizens someone has to be adult and in employment. This is the ‘power’ that the adult world expects.

Sandra, a female indigenous student teacher, claimed that young generation have no voice in society because adults think that they were not ready to take the responsibility in an adult world. Some of the student teachers had personal experiences which excluded them from being engaged in the community because of their age. Hine (2009) suggested that most policy understandings of the lives of young people are based upon adult perceptions and interpretations which often have little cognizance with the lived experience of young people. Young people’s political literacy, their social and community orientated activities and their moral attitudes have all been quantified and used to explain the deficits of young people, largely based on age and risk profiles (Hine, 2009).

3.7. Networking and trust

On the contrary, Matthew looked at how rapport and trust in adults could narrow the bridge between young people and the adult world. Matthew, who had an experienced being actively involved in the youth and community club in his neighborhood area, had no problem being involved in the adult world. He had been involved in youth clubs and community centre and had gained trust from the people in power or adults to handle his own volunteer group. He claimed that the community is a mixture of old and young, educated and non-educated members and some of them never learned civics at all. He added that to be a justice-oriented citizen requires someone who has respect in the community, who is knowledgeable and able to solve problem within his community. He claimed that the leadership of the youngsters played a role to make sure that their voice be heard.

Dina highlighted on the importance of building up networking with the people in power to gain a trust from them. She had experience of discussing the issues in the local area with the rural district council representative and she formed a volunteer group to solve the problems arising from the issues.
“Young people should stand up and become involved in the event to open up networking. Young people should show their communication and leadership skills to be part of the adult world” (Dina, Malay, female) [Author’s translation].

3.8. Freedom of voice

Apart from representing being a multi-ethnic nation, the Malaysian government also practices a system of semi-democracy. Malaysia has frequently been depicted as an exemplary pseudo-democratic government ruled by a single dominant party since first election in 1955. In addition, the politics in Malaysia could be classified as semi-democratic because the government constrained (though did not ban) societal organizing and it prevented the transfer of federal-level power through elections (even though holding them regularly). Hence, opposition parties, occupational associations, and interest groups served mainly as safety valves for discontent in society, rather than as organizations able to raise these discontents into autonomous political claims. Against the western type of human liberties, the so-called pseudo-democratic Malaysia controlled its citizens’ liberties through restrictions upheld in the federal constitution.

When the student teachers were asked about these restrictions the one that they were most against the freedom of speech generally and in the Universities and Universities Colleges Act (UUCA) in particular. UUCA is a piece of legislation that severely curtails freedom of thought, movement and association amongst the young in Malaysian tertiary education. This in turn has a negative impact on the intellectual development and academic autonomy of our institutions of higher learning and the leaders of tomorrow. Under the Act, students and student organizations are prohibited from playing a vital part in the socio-political life of our nation unless with the expressed permission of the Vice-Chancellor. Academic staff are also prohibited from making any public statement that may be perceived as being ‘political’.

Some of the student teachers in this study regardless their ethnicities and religious beliefs tend to disagree with this restriction. They want their voice to be heard by the government.

3.9. Have a say in decision making

Some of the student teachers who disagree with the freedom of voice restriction supported on ‘democracy characteristic’ that should give the power of decision making. Hamidah, a female Malay Muslim student teacher, spoke on the ‘bottom up’ decision as part of democracy practice.

“I think the government should not restrict our voice because we have the right to a voice. The restriction is like an exclusive within an inclusive one. By saying this I meant on the one hand the constitution provision did give us the freedom of speech but on the other hand they exclude us from given an opinion, especially the university students. You know sometimes we need to change the top down instructions to bottom up decision” (Hamidah, Malay, female) [Author’s translation].

3.10. Voice as empowerment

Some student teachers who live in a rural area spoke of the rights to enjoy economic development. Voice as empowerment to alert the state that some of the citizen have been ignored in certain developments. Edison, a male indigenous student teacher, who lived in a flood area, commented on the rights to voice to raise their problem. Observing from previous comment. Eddy also mentioned that most of the rural areas in eastern Malaysia state still have a lack of access to public facilities. They need a voice as a tool to alert the state that some citizens have been excluded from their basic rights.

“I think if the issue raised by the citizens is for the sake of development, I think the government should gave us more space to speak up. The government will never know if we never tell them what are our needs and rights” (Eddy, indigenous, male) [Author’s translation].

Patricia on the other hand speak on to voice up their rights. It is common since ‘reformation era’ in 1998, street demonstration has been used as a mechanism to voice up. Some peoples disagreed with such mechanism as it resulted damage and chaos. Nevertheless some of them look at street demonstration as an effective mechanism compared to the procedure mechanism. For example Patricia claimed:
“I disagree with the restriction because if we didn’t speak up, the state will never know. I also agree with the ‘aggressive demonstration because the people in power knew that the limitation make us passive and they will ignore our rights” (Patricia, Dusun indigenous, female) [Author’s translation].

3.11. Voice as improvement

Vicky, a male Chinese student teacher looked at voice as a tool to improve government administration

“We have to voice up/speak up without restriction because the government will never know all the problems faced by the citizens. It also a way to improve our administration and even the government system” (Vicky, Chinese, male) [Author’s translation].

On the contrary, some of the student teachers agreed with the restriction of voice in multi-ethnic Malaysia. Their disagreement was driven by the factor of street action used by some people to voice up or express their voice which normally caused the damage to the public facilities.

“I think the government should not restrict the freedom of speech as it’s part of our rights. The thing is if one needs to voice up we have to follow the procedures permitted by the government and avoid the extreme street action rally” (Alya, aborigine, female) [Author’s translation].

3.12. Community service: Experiencing voice of others

The seven-week plan and two days experience on organizing a community project revealed some interesting findings. Student teachers in this study have the experience of joining a school club that exposed them to leadership and work in team. It could be said that was an early experience of citizenship participation but they have minimal understanding of the relation of everyday activity with citizenship participation. They have a say in their own project. This different experiences was shared by some of the student teachers during the informal interviews during the community project.

Aida spoke of the difference with the community project under the minor civic and citizenship education with the Youth Club she joined outside the university.

“This time, we have to plan our own project suitable for the needs of the local community. I learnt a lot, all the procedures of how to deal with the people in power. It gave valuable experience on how we the young people deal with the real world” (Aida. Malay, female) [Author’s translation].

Dina added that the process was different between the school club or university club. In school everything been set up by the teacher and the student just followed the teacher’s instructions and in the university club, the senior student will organize. However, in the community project in the service learning course taught her how to deal with the people in power, and in the local community. Communication and leadership skills were really needed in this project.

The student teachers met the young girls of their own age who have left school and married at an early age. The student teachers were quite surprised that none of the girls went to higher education. This is the first time the student teachers explored the life of the aborigines and realized that they discovered the importance of a voice other than their own (field note observation, 5/2012). This voice in important as empowerment for the aborigines: illiteracy and poverty oppressed this group. The student teachers’ reflection in their report recommended that this group’s voice can be achieved by empowering them through education (Student teachers reflection 5/2012).

Therefore, the findings of this study mainly emphasize the importance of the group over the individual and stress the importance of consensus, to counter the pressures in favor of democratizing the country in the direction of a liberal democracy (Mohammad, 1991). Their voice were unheard and no space for them to be an active citizens.

4. Conclusion

Teens today are the leaders of tomorrow. This generation will be a leaders who will shape the face of the future nation of Malaysia. Therefore, expectations, opinions and their true voice of them about the country, citizen and citizenship cannot be marginalized as an isolated group sound. Although these findings cannot be
generalized as the "voice" of the entire young generation in Malaysia, but this finding was shining a little truth about the scenario in Malaysia from the perspective of young generation who responded to the study. Meanwhile, to build a strong nation, it is necessary to take into account all relevant groups voices such as women, the disabled and youth because they are all citizens who have the right as citizens along with the responsibility.

Thus, the researchers suggest that further study of this phenomenon should be continued in a more comprehensive and in-depth in order to elicit young generation’s views, which is essential for Malaysian nation building.

References