



UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ASSOCIATIONS AND THEIR ROLE IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN CHINA

Marina Kogayⁱ

Faculty of Education,
Northeast Normal University,
Changchun, China

Abstract:

This article presents a study about students' associations in China and their role in citizenship education of young people. The study has taken place at Northeast Normal University, China and focused on two students' associations. The research questions address to find out in what kind of the association activities students participate, what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values they obtain, and how these competences are related to citizenship education. The findings have shown that by participating in student association activities students acquire various practical and professional knowledge and skills. After joining the associations there have been great changes in their values and attitudes towards society, work and life. Student association activities enhance students' voluntary actions, social and moral responsibility, civic values, and students' personal development. This research is useful for studies on understanding of citizenship education in the Asia Pacific Region. It contributes to the pedagogy of citizenship education in informal curriculum activities. The results of the research can be used for making specific programs for arranging activity of students' associations.

Keywords: citizenship education; students associations; China

1. Introduction

Young generation can cause great positive changes in the world by improving society around it. China youth policy (Goethals, 2012) indicates the necessity to increase youth activity in realization of personal, society and state interests and development. Therefore, it became crucial to reveal social and pedagogical approaches which make a process of youth socialization more effective, promote student involvement in socially useful and meaningful activities, encourage their participation in the realization of state youth policy, and in solving urgent problems of society.

ⁱ Correspondence: email kogay.marina@gmail.com

Among countries in transition, like China, citizenship education faces some conflicts with traditional structure and customs. New modernization reforms in China concerning education, economy, and political structure of the state have brought new ideas, new ways of thinking, new approaches, and put old ones behind (Qi and Tang 2004). China's future depends on youth ability to leadership and to find creative and innovative solutions for social problems (Cen and Li, 2006). It requires special attention to the education of youth and their roles as citizens. Efforts to promote personal and social development in Chinese youth may not only develop individual resilience, but also build strong leadership skills and social values, fostering active engagement in civic life (Goldstein and Brooks, 2005).

Many young people in China pay more attention to their social life only in the university because the pressure of final national examination is gone, and workload in university is lighter than in school. Most of the students leave their parents, move to another province to enter a university and live in students dormitories. It is the time when they begin their independent life apart from their families.

Therefore, an idea to explore students' spare time inside educational institution seems to be of big interest. One of the main instruments of citizenship education in university is students' government – a special form of initiative, independent and responsible public activity of students, aimed at solving students' problems and to promote students' social activity.

It is obvious to say that extracurricular activities influence students' life as greatly as usual academic courses. Active work of students' associations presents integral part of extracurricular activity; that is why students' associations are the major component in students' education. All this explains the urgency of studying students' organizations and pedagogical conditions of their effective realization.

Though there is increased number of studies about citizenship education and student governance, these issues have some peculiarities in the Chinese context. Chinese society has witnessed a struggle for the relaxation of strict political control and authoritarian party rule, and experienced an eagerness to build a democratic civil society. Ideological shifts and social transition have opened the door to educational reforms such as curriculum reforms and the decentralization of educational policy, school financing, and administration (Mok, 1997). Chinese scholars have sought a balance in the tension between Marxist-Leninist ideology, the legacy of traditional Chinese culture, and 'imported' foreign wisdom.

In the past in feudal society and authoritarian rule in China, people were the subject of power of the emperor (Xiao, 2004). Chinese traditional culture lacked the idea of respect for individual rights (Kan, 2010). Previous teaching paid a lot of attention to obligation one should carry for the good of the state. Nowadays citizenship education in China aims to balance these duties with citizen rights and citizens obligations (Li et al, 2004). Meanwhile in western societies' realization of rights, recognition of democracy and rational attitude for power are the basis of citizenship education (Kan, 2010).

Citizenship education in China has been introduced into education, besides formal curriculum, through informal curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

Practically, citizenship education is implemented and organized by the Communist Youth League of China and students' unions and associations, which are under the leadership of the former. That's why the Communist Youth League has controlling function and to some extent limits students' association activity. In China, a student association of a particular university usually plays the role of the organizer of various student activities.

Citizenship education in China is framed inside a collectivist understanding of the individual and rights, mixed with orthodox ideological philosophy, basic economic knowledge and concept of legality. Citizenship education goals are considered important, but the content is remote from students' real lives. Recent exploration of the content of citizenship education had made some significant amendments in this field, but the influence of the changes is still limited (Kan, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to describe student associations and how they influence students' citizenship education. The research has been conducted among students, who have been members of student associations, in one university of China.

The study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. In what students' association activities do students participate?
2. What kind of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values related to citizenship education do students obtain by participating in these activities?

2. Citizenship Education in Western and Chinese Contexts

Although this term has many definitions, in a broad sense citizenship education means the process of formation of particular knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for becoming good citizens, aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities (Schulz et al 2010). In this study, citizenship education can be seen as an attempt of students' associations to develop student's personality through extra-curriculum activities by training, understanding and dealing with social, political and economic issues.

Speaking of the notion of citizenship some scholars refer to T.H. Marshall. His theory of citizenship is a classic liberal theory, where citizenship consists of three elements: civil, political and social rights (Marshall 1950). The civil rights are the rights necessary for individual freedom: liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice. Political rights are the rights to participate in evaluation of political power. The social element includes the right to economic welfare and security, the right to live the life of a civilized person according to the standards prevailing in the society (Marshall 1950). However, Marshall's theory of citizenship might be criticized for restricted description of citizenship, laws and policies, which could lead to more social inequalities.

According to Schulz et al (2010), citizenship education focuses on knowledge and understanding and on opportunities for engagement in civic and civil life. It is concerned with the ways through which citizens interact with and shape their communities and societies.

Many countries are worried about low level of participation in public life among citizens and young people lack of interest in political and public life (Curtice and Seyd, 2010). But youth still support political values like justice, tolerance and solidarity (Schulz et al 2010). There is also some evidence that young people are becoming increasingly engaged in alternative forms of participation involving community-based action with peers of similar age and internet-based campaigns relating to such issues as the environment and ethical consumerism (Park et al, 2010).

The idea of citizenship in Asian countries has come from the West in the nineteenth - twentieth century, and has its own peculiarities. In East Asia, education focuses mostly on nation building and identity (Zhang, 2011). Main characteristics of Asian understanding of citizenship are individuality, harmony, spirituality. It aims at developing autonomous, rational and responsible persons through citizenship education (Lee, 2004).

With modernization and social transformation period in China, more and more Chinese people recognize citizenship education as an important part in building modern state. That is why citizenship education which is based on freedom and equality, human rights, is essential choice for the country. So in Chinese context democratic values and nationalism intertwine together.

In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping came to power, several reforms were conducted which moved Chinese policy from traditional centralized planned economy to market economy model (Zhao and Fairbrother, 2010). The years after reforms in 1978 showed sufficient accent on social stability and people's welfare. This resulted from large attention to economic development through openness to the world outside.

Having understood that people's participation is necessary, national state tries to inspire commitment in people and active participation in building new society, based on national dignity and pride (Zhao and Fairbrother, 2010). One of the directions on citizenship education calls for young people to cultivate and implement their civic, political and economic rights and responsibilities (Fairbrother, 2008). Other directions focus on developing spiritual and psychological welfare, moral and intellectual skills to promote quality of life (Lee and Ho 2005).

New reforms in education system in 1990s-2000s focused not only on the content of education, but also to new approaches in pedagogy and methods of learning, which means new open classroom climate, learning through practice, attention to students' way of thinking and analyzing, their imagination, curiosity, creativity and communication skills (Zhao and Fairbrother, 2010). With openness to outside world Chinese education adopted western theories of education, by taking everything necessary and valuable in Chinese context.

3. Informal Curriculum and Students' Associations

A formal curriculum contains planned educational program for students and teachers with goals, content, resources and evaluation offered by institution administration; while an informal curriculum is extra-curriculum activities outside the context of

classroom (Lewis, 2004; Haensly et al, 1985). In this study, the informal curriculum refers to students' out of class activities. They are participating in various social events such as volunteering, participation in clubs and raising funds for charities, conducting and performing any arts and sports events. Being a member of students' association is a part of extracurricular activity.

Main components of active citizenship are participation, voluntary work and community involvement, which are interconnected with each other (Gemmeke et al, 2005). Meanwhile informal curriculum includes the same components. Pro-social and community-based activities develop student skills and knowledge, mostly required by citizenship education. They can learn how to become an effective citizen through participating in students' clubs, unions, associations and councils.

Though there are few studies on impact of informal curriculum on student knowledge, some results show that members of student organizations have better verbal and cognitive results, more high self-esteem and self-control (Helm 1991; Wu 1992). Lewis (2004) states that participation in extracurricular activities is useful for children, and it is an effective approach to obtain real social experience. Students can learn about themselves and surroundings, they can find their own way to success in future. These activities help them to gain independence, interact with their peers, and obtain new skills.

Pro-social activities give an opportunity for students to boost their social and practical skills, competence, and values. Hodgkinson and Weitzman (1990) conducted a study about volunteer work of students. Students reported that they knew about volunteer activity through participating in some organization. Among their activities, they help old people, do baby-sitting, clean windows, and work with other social service organizations. Community involvement and volunteering make student be more sensitive to social problems. They become more responsible, self-confident and resilience (Hodgkinson and Weitzman, 1990)

Young people grow up to be citizens under the influence (consciously aware or not) of their parents, friends, mass media and group or clubs of interest, where they may belong. Most of this influence will remain in adulthood (Heather 1999). Educational institutions and non-government organizations have a great potential for positive influence on students' citizenship education. They are part of the everyday life experience of young people. Students face challenges, which may be important in their life, and they solve these challenges by taking part in real actions (Gemmeke et al, 2005). Beck and Jennings (1982) found out in the United States that extracurricular activities (or informal curriculum) better predict further student participation in political life, than formal curriculum civic classes.

As can be seen, some extracurricular activities promote and develop students' civic engagement and social responsibility, cooperation, leadership skills and self-improvement. All these are part of citizenship education. And one of the essential elements of informal curriculum is students' associations, unions and clubs.

Student association (sometimes also called unions, student government or organizations) is usually an informal curriculum activity for students; a students' body

which gives students an opportunity to participate and conduct various extra-curriculum activities on the base of an educational institution (Fletcher 2005). Depending on a country's social and cultural conditions, purposes and functions of students' associations can be different. Generally speaking they represent students both within the institution and externally, including on local and national issues. They are also responsible for providing a variety of services to students. Students' associations organize institution's social events and projects and also deal with some administrative issues concerning students' life. In China student body is called 学生会 (pronounced as *xue sheng hui*) or 协会. (pronounced as *xie hui*) which means 'association', that is why in this article I'm going to use the term 'student association'.

The concept of student government becomes more and more topical in the educational world today. It is, in a broad sense, student union, association or organization, extracurricular activity within an educational institution, which is run and implemented by students. These associations promote consolidation and strengthen student social positions and activity. Students' associations further democratic civic relations and active citizenship.

Participation in students' associations lets students to gain knowledge and skills, which promote their personal growth and development. It can be called self-actualization – a process when an individual tries to reach his/her full human potential. Student government can include following associations: student council, student voluntary unions, student interest group, art group, students' sport club and etc. Depending on the country the purpose, structure and functions of students' association can vary.

In the United States students' unions, which activity can be related to civic education, implement following projects: mock elections, mock trials, mock legislative hearings on constitutional issues (Branson, 1998). These projects provide direct contact with administration and government, and also with other non-governmental organizations.

In China, all students' unions and associations are under the leadership and monitoring of Communist Youth League (CYL), which is ruled by China Communist Party. It is a large youth organization under the leadership of Communist party, where young people of China learn communism in practice. CYL supports program of the Party, using ideas of Marxism, Mao Zedong thoughts and Deng Xiaoping theories as guidance for its actions.

This organization unites all youth from different ethnics groups to make China prosper, democratic and civilized modern socialist state. Its purpose is to unite and lead young people, by working hard together, to promote development of youth, to boost social progress and to foster successors with ideals, ethics, education and a sense of discipline in the great practice of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.

CYL functions under the system of socialist democratic centralism. Local authorities consists of the Communist Youth League of province, autonomous regions, municipality, and city districts.

4. Methodology

Based on the literature, purpose and research questions, four elements of citizenship education were marked out:

- *Knowledge and understanding* (perception of citizenship, political and civic literacy, political concepts (ideology, democracy, power, etc.), awareness of public affairs, events)
- *Attitudes and values* (political efficacy, political trust, interest, trust in media, acknowledging human rights and rule of the law, attitudes towards government responsibility, civic values, tolerance, non-violence, equality, freedom, justice, diversity, sense of national dignity)
- *Skills* (collaboration and cooperation, critical thinking and problem-solving, communication skills, debating skills, empathy, leadership, digital literacy and others)
- *Political and social participation* (involvement in social and political activities, voluntary work)

Citizenship education and students' associations have a lot in common. They pursue similar goals: enhance political and civic knowledge, voluntary actions, social and moral responsibility, civic values, student self-actualization and personal development (skills and dispositions) – competences required by the twenty-first century. Student citizenship education develops inside the association. It comes from the four dimensions of student outcome, by participating in the association: knowledge and understanding, attitudes and values, skills, political and social participation.

4.1 Population and sample

Asian traditions are quite different from the other world. They were less investigated; however all the world community understands the importance of studying Asian countries. Chinese context is unique in its nature – it is the country where democratic values mixed with nationalism and centralism, where centuries-old traditions mixed with modern “imported” thoughts.

Northeast Normal University in Changchun, China, was chosen based on the several criteria. This university is famous by its name as ‘cradle of teachers’. So many students here are future educators and education policy-makers, that’s why it was quite essential to investigate their perceptions or dispositions towards the concept of citizenship.

In Northeast Normal University, the Communist Youth League works under the guidance of the general idea of the integration of education and teaching, curricular and extracurricular activities. The main functions of the organization are to improve the quality of education, to cultivate innovation, to focus on practice, to create strong campus culture based on principle of ‘three highs’ (high-level, high-grade, high cultural content), to carry out a variety of campus cultural activities, to cultivate students' interest in learning, to foster passion to create, and social responsibility.

Northeast Normal University (NENU) has 105 students' associations under the guidance of Communist Youth League. All these associations have one goal in common – student personal development and growth and student self-actualization, which are required to be a full member of the society, to be a good citizen. This study focused on two associations – Red Candle Volunteer Association (红烛志愿者协会) and NENU International Student Association (东北师范大学国际学生交流协会) – since their extracurricular activities directly related to citizenship education that can be seen through the purpose and principles of the associations.

Main principles and functions of Red Candle Volunteer Association: dedication, friendship, mutual assistance and progress, establishment and improvement of the recruitment, training, management, protection, evaluation of volunteer management system, college youth voluntary service work system, to promote student community service, event service, environmental protection and others.

Main principles and purposes of NENU International Student Association: to promote team spirit, good social behavior, actively involve enthusiasm in work, to help and assist international in their stay in China, to promote Chinese culture, to share and exchange cultural experience and others.

Only two students' associations were studied out of 105. The total number of Chinese students in these two associations is 380 (Red candle – 300; International students association – 80). Sample size is 40 students (Red candle – 20; International students association – 20). Purposeful, snowball sampling procedure was employed.

4.2 Data collection instrument and data analysis

The two associations were contacted in October 2012 personally and were invited to take part in the research. In the middle of November 2012, the interview was sent through email to the students, who were asked to complete it within two week period. However, completed interviews were received up to February 2013.

The e-mail structured interview was used for data collection. This choice was made based on several reasons:

- No need to transcribe the answers of the participants. They would write by themselves and there would be no omissions.
- It would help me to more effectively translate the answers.
- Some people feel less pressure by answering via e-mail.
- Respondents can answer the questions during their free time.

The structure of the interview was based on the purpose of the study and research questions. The interview included predetermined structured open-ended questions and open-ended comments.

The interview consisted of five parts: (1) background information, (2) experience in the association, (3) perception of citizenship, (4) future plans and perspectives and (5) open comments.

The interview questions were translated from English to Chinese with the help of Chinese university student. This was done with the purpose to ensure clarity and accurateness of the data collection instrument. Before the data analysis all students'

responses were translated from Chinese into English. Each respondent was given a number to make it easier to trace back the original transcript. The data were analyzed by using an interpretive qualitative approach (Glesne, 1999). The data were coded, cataloged and categorized on themes. All the students' responds were scanned to identify similar categories. All the relevant information was classified into students' attitudes, skills, knowledge and social participation. Then similar responses were divided into themes.

5. Main Findings

40 students of Northeast Normal University participated in the interviews in this study. There were slightly more female (23) than male (17) participants. All the students were pursuing Bachelor degree in the university and most of them were freshmen. Starting from second year of education in the university specialized courses begin and many students do not have time to participate in associations, that is why there were small number (only two) of senior students in this research.

The number of students participating in more than one association decreases from the first year of membership to the fourth year. The more and longer experience students have in the association the higher their position in the association.

There were many reasons for joining the associations mentioned by students. Besides the fact that students had interest, curiosity and desire to participate in the associations' activities, one of the popular answers was to make friends:

"Participation in the associations can enrich my campus life and improve my ability of social communication. Most of all I can learn a lot from it and make new friends." (#14)

Many students came to association because they wanted to change and challenge themselves. It shows their desire of self-improvement and -development:

"I wanted to improve my abilities and make friends with others. I wanted to change myself. I think I can become better and better." (#21)

Some of the respondents recognized that association can offer them a lot of learning opportunities. They could acquire practical and useful knowledge and skills through this extracurricular activity:

"I think the association can help me get a lot of knowledge, which cannot be obtained in the regular classroom." (#16)

As can be seen students had personal benefits associated with participation in the associations. Kerr (2004) found out that students were more likely to join voluntary activities if there were some benefits for them like meeting interesting people or get professional experience.

5.1 Student associations' activities

Students were asked about their participation in activities of association and their functions there. All the associations' activities named by students can be divided into five groups:

- Community service;
- Contests and talent shows;
- Sport games;
- Cultural events;
- Trainings and students forum.

Community service implemented by students included voluntary teaching (giving lessons), collecting waste bottles, visiting old people in nursing homes where students did various works to help the old people, chatted with them. They also conducted several events like Mental health day or Psychology class in elementary schools. Voluntary work is a good way to develop social skills and get real experience. It teaches students compassion, sympathy and patience, to be very helpful to the society. Voluntarism is for those who care a lot about other people and really love what they're doing.

Contests and talent shows aimed to reveal the best students in some fields of knowledge or skills. Such projects conducted by the associations were: Sign language contest, English speech contest, Singing Contest, Debate Contest, Teaching Skills Contest and some others. Besides participating in these events, students also work as coordinators and organizers themselves. Some were masters of ceremony or did cheerleading in the contest. Others were responsible for registration of participants or making posters for the event. During the participation, students learned and improved their negotiation skills (for example, in debate contest), public speaking skills, and how to make a PR campaign.

Students also organize various sport games and entertainment activities between Chinese and international students: volleyball, basketball, badminton, football and ping-pong. Members of the association were game judges, cheerleaders, participants. They were helping international students in registration procedure, supplied different items used in the games, and wrote reports and news on every event. By working with international students, they were improving intercultural relations, promoting friendship and cooperation between different nationalities.

Among cultural events, students named literature evenings, Chinese Corner, lectures about foreign culture and cultural parties for international and Chinese students. Students prepared some cultural performances; they also recorded the activities, took pictures and posted news. Cultural events helped students to exchange and share experience and knowledge with international students. It promoted international collaboration between them. Chinese students learnt about traditions, customs and behaviors of different nations while international students became familiar with Chinese culture.

Students also participated in some trainings and students forums like team-building exercise, volunteer training activities in the college of education, students' camp and the fourth national innovation entrepreneurship training program in NENU.

5.2 Students' knowledge

Speaking about development of students' knowledge in the associations, the study explored their perception of the concept *citizen*, their awareness of political affairs and events, rights and responsibilities, the media and other knowledge about life.

Students' understanding of the concept *citizen* has been classified into 6 thematic categories:

- Social responsibility (*'to be a citizen means to me to take more responsibility, and contribute to the community'*(# 02))
- Moral responsibility (*'a citizen must be a big-hearted man'*(#11))
- Educated person (*'it means to have more responsibilities on one's shoulders; be experienced in real life. We have to consider questions from all the aspects'* (#13))
- Independency (*'it means we are more independent both in mind and life. We are able to make important decisions by ourselves'*(#14))
- Awareness of one's rights (*'it means that you can fully enjoy the rights of citizens as well as citizens' obligation'*(#04))
- National citizenship and patriotism. (*'to be Chinese it means to belong to China; to stand for Chinese interests. At the same time to enjoy your rights and benefits protected by law'* (#24))

News and media are one of main tools for acquiring knowledge about political and social events. The results have shown that students don't spend much time for reading or watching news. And the most convenient way for them to know the news was Internet (via Weibo, Weixin or micro-blogging). Students would like to discuss current political affairs and social events with their classmates or roommates.

32% of respondents reported that their most concerned national issue was education policy. Students would like to promote inclusive education, improve the system of entrance examination, develop education in rural areas and solve the problem with teachers' employment. The second popular national issue (29%) among respondents was country sovereignty and national security. 23% of students named social and economic issues as one of the important. They were concerned about poverty, the gap between rich and poor people, social stability, social service, health care and unemployment.

It was also shown that students obtained a lot of practical and professional knowledge in the associations: teaching knowledge, how to work in MS Office, Photoshop and others.

The results also indicate students' deeper knowledge and understanding of life, other cultures, customs and traditions:

In addition to the knowledge about volunteers, I also learnt some truth of life, like: *'if we are united we will get the result twice faster with half of the efforts'* (#05).

After events in the association:

'I got many foreign friends. I knew more about foreign countries culture' (#13).

One of the students understandings of the concept *citizen* refer to only national citizenship. However, Kerr (2004) and Banks (2004) add one more category as global citizenship, which was not named by the Chinese students. Global citizenship means to function beyond one's cultural borders; to be aware of international problems and world issues, to work towards equal rights for every nation and state (Banks, 2004; 2008). The respondents were more focused on national understanding of citizen and citizenship.

5.3 Students' skills

When students conducted some activities, they obtained organizational skills. They learnt how to plan, coordinate, lead, and cooperate, manage time and how to make it all work together. They improved their negotiation skills and public speaking. Respondents learnt how to identify, analyze and solve problems.

"Say, the most difficult was to organize the donations to a primary school, it was also a charity performance. We needed to contact the school, to determine the program, make fund-raising, write event planning, and prepare reports and advertisement. The solution was, of course, to divide our responsibilities, the different jobs – to different people; they elaborated the work by themselves and did everything by themselves. But everyone should see the whole picture of the event" (#31).

To participate in an association means to work in a team. Team-work improves person's critical-thinking skills and develops cooperation and collaboration skills. Students started more listening to other people; they became more patient and passionate at the same time, more open-hearted.

"Team-work is a benefit for us. We can understand advantages and disadvantages of work and explore many good ways of work. In the team-work, we need to consider others opinions" (#19).

"In this association I learnt how to get along well with others, how to express my ideas better, be more open when I speak" (#21).

By working with international students, they were improving intercultural relations, promoting friendship and cooperation between different nationalities. It promoted international collaboration between them.

5.4 Attitudes and values

There was a change in students' attitude towards work. They indicated that they became more serious, responsible and thoughtful towards work. Students stopped

being too lazy or afraid of hard work; they started enjoying challenges brought during association activities.

"There has been a great change in the attitude towards doing things. When I do some work I cannot be sloppy, I need to be thoughtful and also to be able to act according to circumstances" (#30).

The results have shown the change in the attitude towards people and society. Students became more open, kinder and friendly. They believed in good nature of human.

"Now I think that my work and recognition of others made me better. Now I realize what it means to be a good man (funny and kind-hearted). I learnt to be kind to the old men; to do volunteering all the time" (#24).

They learnt to trust and rely on each other (*'I became more open, active. I more often ask other peoples advice' (#26)*) and respect each other (*'...how to respect everyone, to take responsibility' (#21)*).

85% of students stated that they would not obey the law which violated human rights and they would defend their rights. They acknowledged human rights and rule of the law. Students saw the law as tool of justice that based on human rights and should serve people.

"The law should maintain people's authority, but if law violates human rights, it is not justice. Everyone should defend their rights" (#12).

Students were in favor of developing social justice, moral principles and values even if it would lead to violating or challenging existing laws, customs or structures. However, some of students were ready to obey the law if it was for good of majority of people. Others trusted in government that would modify this kind of law.

82.5% of respondents have shown tolerance and non-violence towards ethnic groups and other nations. They agreed that even right for freedom of speech didn't imply absolute freedom. It is limited by law and moral principles. Students recognized the ethnic diversity of China, and they also emphasized that mutual respect and tolerance are keys to social harmony and national unity.

"If people can say any racial thoughts against nation or ethnic groups, it will not promote national peace and national unity" (#28).

Students have embraced cultural diversity of China and possessed cosmopolitan dispositions (Keating, 2016), which are trust and tolerance towards ethnic minorities and respect for human rights.

The findings have shown that 75% of students are confident in their power, abilities and strength. They believed that they could influence and improve the world in their own ways.

"...I am a human, I love peace, and I follow the law. And it means that in the world there is one restless person less, less one militant. It contributes to peace in the world" (#04).

"I will practice my own ideals of education. I will let the next generation of children grow up healthy, worry-free, and let them fully develop their intellectual potential!" (#29).

Others 25%, who were not confident in themselves, believed that human power had limits or were disappointed in society.

"My personal strength is limited. This world makes people feel fear" (#30).

"Many people destroy everything around them" (#05).

Other students mentioned that sometimes their development was limited. As students, they were not allowed to do some things they would like to do. They cannot go beyond existing customs or rules, because they do not have higher social status. But this is also a question of personal belief and self-confidence, though it can concern education system in whole.

"Sometimes, as a student, I only can talk about some political activities but I cannot do anything for it" (#10).

Some students also noticed that university played an important role in developing of associations. It should pay more attention on such communities because they could strongly influence students' life:

"I have participated in several different associations, and I think that different associations have different cultures and the needs for its existence, and I think that the university should pay attention to the existence of every association, and actively guide the development and progress of these associations" (#28).

Most of the students acknowledged human rights and rule of the law, had positive attitude towards social justice, tolerance, non-violence, ethnic diversity and national unity. Putnam (1995) reported that these civic and democratic values are the base of civil society. Participation in the associations makes students to more interact with other people and teaches them to be kinder and more open, to understand social and moral values, to be a better citizen.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

This research study explored the development of students' citizenship education in two student association activities located in Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China. Based on the results of the study the following recommendations for future research have been made.

1. In the current study, only two associations were investigated. To better understand peculiarities of citizenship education and students associations in Chinese context in future research there should include more diverse students associations and participants.
2. Further work needs to be done to establish whether there is relation between gender and level of political and civic knowledge or social and political participation.
3. Students' social and economic background wasn't investigated in this study. That's why it would be interesting to explore whether social and economic background influence students citizenship education.
4. Students have shown low interest in political participation and news. The relationship between students' attitudes towards politics and government, students' background and their future political participation requires further exploration.
5. Also, future studies can focus on the role of educational institutions in developing students associations.

The more rigorous and comprehensive research needs to be done in future. Further studies can enrich the existing knowledge of citizenship education and/or students government. Such studies may have altered settings, population, data collection and analysis procedure and so on. Citizenship education in China is comparatively young subject which needs further thorough investigation.

7. Conclusion

The associations activities made students to be more socially and morally responsible. They possessed professional knowledge, analytical, interpersonal skills. Students were aware of social, political and economic problems in the country, they shown their readiness and proposals to solve them. They also acknowledge the human rights and rule of the law, democratic values (tolerance, non-violence, justice, and diversity). All of these knowledge, skills and attitudes are integral part of citizenship education.

80% of students wanted to connect their future career with education either to become a teacher or education administrators. Many of them wanted to influence their future students by promoting their ideas and vision on education. That makes the results of this research important for prediction of students' future behavior and social activity.

Citizenship education develops inside students associations through its activities. In these associations, students learn through practice. They improve their

professional skills and enrich their knowledge. Students begin to think critically, be ready to solve the problem, be reasonable, contribute to the society; they get a lot of professional knowledge. But also while acquiring new knowledge their attitudes and values change. There is a great change in students' attitudes towards other people, government, work and life. At the same time their attitudes, new obtained skills and knowledge would influence their future social and political participation. Many of students are ready to participate in voluntary activities. However, most of them are not interested in political activities.

China is still in transitional period when Western democratic principles (like individualism and independence) are trying to blend with Asian traditions and moral principles (like collectivism and socialism). The findings show that sometimes the mixture of these two paradigms causes contradictions or challenges in student mind. For centuries, Chinese education policy focused on youth moral education. It reveals in students' perception of citizen like a socially and morally responsible person, who is a kind-hearted and a good man. They believe in national unity, and also that they have many obligations and debts to society and state. Many Chinese students are quite patriotic and ready to contribute and develop their country. However, there are also a lot of students who want independency, personal success and individual self-realization.

In my opinion, joining students associations and participation in their activities help students to manage their controversial needs. On the one hand, associations help students to self-actualize and develop their personal capacity. On the other hand, in the associations students have to work and cooperate with other people, take responsibility for their actions. It makes them more careful, thoughtful, patient and tolerant towards others.

Based on the findings, students' associations play a vital role in students' life. They are part of them. For students an association is a school of life, a small society where one can get lots of experience. And they also mentioned that university should pay more attention on development of students' associations. The results of the study contribute to better understanding of Chinese students associations. It also investigated social issues that are of concern both national and local governments and students as future citizens. The study touches the development of citizenship education in China. Although it does not cover the whole China, it provides a unique example of Changchun, a representative of Northeast China.

About the author

Marina Kogay is a PhD candidate in the faculty of Education at Northeast Normal University, Changchun, China. She is an international student from Russia working in the field of citizenship education.

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