Challenges of Civic Education in Non-Western Countries: A Vignette from Mauritius

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This chapter explores the importance of civic education in both primary and secondary school curriculum in Mauritius. Civic education is not prioritized as a subject in Mauritius. In the interest of upholding the country’s democratic ideals, it is critical to educate youngsters to be engaged citizens throughout all of their schooling. Such education is especially important in newer democratic states such as Mauritius. The vignette we offer in this chapter explores the challenges faced by educators and researchers who are seeking to strengthen or build stable foundations for democracy in countries such as Mauritius and encourages a shared commitment to providing a democratic education not only in Mauritius but in similarly situated countries globally.

KEYWORDS: Civic Education; Youth; Political Socialization; Primary Secondary School Curriculum.

Introduction

As Brennan writes, civic education builds a virtuous and knowledgeable civic culture supported by active committed citizens. Without this foundation, a country is static. Many established democracies have become more reflective on ways to build youth civic participation as a means of ensuring a stable, and democratic future. Scholars and educators agree that this path to building youth participation should occur both inside and outside of the classroom, as institutions of education at all levels are the incubators and custodians of active citizens for the future and current success of democracies around the world.

In less developed states, however, some of the tools to build and foster civic education may be minimal or absent entirely. An absence of political knowledge and skills leads to a lack of efficacy and declines in youth voting, which will then impact future political and civic engagement in these countries. In the case of Mauritius, civic education has not been prioritized in the school curriculum and remains a neglected subject, hindering the political socialization of young Mauritians. As Tovmasyan and Thoma advocate, “the ultimate goal of civic education is to prepare generations for the essential principles and values of democracy embodied with a high sense of responsibility and active engagement in issues the society, community, or state face in their everyday life.”

This chapter explores challenges faced by educators and researchers who are seeking to strengthen or build stable foundations for democracy in countries with newer democratic systems and calls for a shared commitment to provide this education for democracy not only in Mauritius but in similarly situated countries globally.
Challenges

As this book and previous APSA books on civic engagement explain, civic education is a formative learning experience focused on democratic principles which frames democratic competence, meaning the necessary knowledge, skills, beliefs, values, attitudes, and dispositions for rational human action to enhance decision making and responsibility in the democratization of society. Hess and Torney demonstrate that children can develop political experience as early as elementary school. By the end of primary education, they show that children can expand their political efficacy more clearly by cultivating informal methods for political engagement. Before the age of 10, Piaget explains that children see class rules and body of laws as autocratic, but at 10-years-old they start to discover democracy by respecting and observing rules as a means of promoting an ethical community. Lee Ehman affirmed that early to mid-adolescence (11–17 years-old) is a period when students can engage in political thought with abstractions. Henceforward, we can see that adolescence brings a remarkable watershed of political idealism fed by utopianism, where teenagers search for ideologies for an ethical society. The National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) showed that from 1969 to 1976 in the United States, students between the ages of 13 and 17 had noteworthy changes in their political attitudes.

In the case of Mauritius, such a change was witnessed during the 1970s when student movements made a great impact on society. Mauritius gained its independence from the United Kingdom in 1968, and leaders quickly established a democratic government with a substantial welfare state which included free education. Universal adult suffrage was granted in Mauritius in 1956 when both men and women could vote at the age of 21, and in 1976 the voting age was reduced to age 18.

As the new Mauritius was established in the 1970s and 1980s, leaders recognized that the youth must be educated about the new government and political system in order to build and stabilize the multi-ethnic country. Thus, secondary school social studies textbooks in the 1980s had a complete unit titled, “How is our society governed?” with sub-topics such as “our constitution,” “general elections,” and one for each branch of government. The text even included a case study of how the government functions to enhance informed awareness of what happens in governance and how it happens. In the 1980s and 1990s, though led primarily by only two governing families, Mauritius had become a largely stable and prosperous country, reaching the high human development category of the United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Index in 1996.

The economic development of Mauritius has been termed the "Mauritius Miracle." The economy is fueled by exports of sugar and textiles, tourism, and financial services, and the country has a diverse set of export and import partners. The average gross domestic product per capita totaled US $22,870 before the coronavirus pandemic, placing it at 85th in the world, which is striking for a population of just over 1.3 million people. Literacy is high at 91% of the population, and while overall pre-pandemic unemployment was low at 6.65%, youth unemployment (24 years old and under) totaled 21.8% in 2017. Poverty is not unusually high in Mauritius, at 10.3%. This economic success after independence has helped to support democratic governance, even though leadership has been largely controlled by two families.

Mauritius has no indigenous population. Instead, its people are the ancestors of those brought by British, French, and Dutch colonial powers to the island. The resulting population includes those with backgrounds from Hindu and Muslim Indians, Chinese, and various African countries, in addition to the European colonial groups. The country has not included questions on ethnicity in its census since 1972, and thus such demographic or identity data do not exist. The dominant language is Creole, though English, spoken by a small percent of the population, is the official language of the government. Almost one-half of the population considers Hindu their religion; one-quarter adhere to Roman Catholicism; and about 17% are Muslims. In this multi-ethnic context, preserving the common foundational values of Mauritian democracy is of great importance. According to the National Curriculum Framework under the Mauritius Institute of Examination, the subject of social studies is supposed to nurture informed and engaged citizenship and to en-
hance harmony and unity in society.\textsuperscript{13}

However, there are concerns that more recent leaders are dismantling the educational supports for Mauritian democracy. In 2013, new secondary school social studies textbooks were issued, but the previous extensive sections on democracy and governance were eliminated. Starting in 2005, education became compulsory up to age 16 with the introduction of mandatory 11-year schooling.\textsuperscript{14} To strengthen its education system as a knowledge hub empowering versatile youth, the Government Program of 2015–2019 included a launch of the Nine-Year Continuous Basic Education Reform (NYS).\textsuperscript{15} This reform brought forth new versions of the textbook that grouped social studies knowledge into three main areas—history, geography, and sociology.

The history section helps students to learn about past events, examine different values such as social justice, and challenge viewpoints of diverse groups in society. History helps them to associate with their ancestors and preserve their own culture and heritage which fosters a sense of patriotism, hopefully promoting national unity. The geography section explores the interaction of human beings within the physical environment and how changes in this environment affect their lives. The goal is to help students better understand the consequences of people’s interactions in their surroundings and the ways that they can improve resources and institutions. The third section—sociology—examines current issues and the way of life in Mauritius’ changing society. Students are exposed to influential societal forces and are educated to confront the challenges of social reality. This section purports to emphasize ways to develop active citizenship so that young people can make better decisions concerning the country.\textsuperscript{16}

Yet, while the 2015 reform acknowledges the importance of citizenship education in primary school education (grades 1 to 6) and includes “Values and Citizenship” as a single subject which is integrated across all subjects, the same learning area is omitted from grade 7 and above.\textsuperscript{17} The new secondary social studies textbook’s section on sociology mostly covers law and order issues, with a mere six pages for a section titled, “Developing Responsible Citizenship.” Significant explanations of the government and the constitution and how they work are absent. Though updates were certainly needed from the 1980s text, crucial basic information on democracy and the vibrant section on how governance works in practice have been eliminated.

Recent interviews with former government ministers and members of parliament reveal their concerns about the future of the country when education about government is diminished in secondary schools.\textsuperscript{18} One minister stated that citizenship education (his preferred term) needs to be properly conceived as an interactive process relating topical issues such as the death penalty or legalization of cannabis to governance. He proposed active learning formats, such as debates in any language which students want, and research projects constructed as opportunities for students to speak up and interview people. He raised the examples of Singapore and Scandinavian countries as taking more than 40 years to build the kind of citizenship that they have and to which Mauritians should aspire, meaning disciplined, responsible, and productive citizens who participate regularly in democratic governance.

Another former minister stated that, above all, civic education should be student-centered and not exam-based. He also highlighted that students should learn about the parliament, the constitution, and basic political processes from the beginning of their education and build this knowledge at different stages. Both former ministers also emphasized that the government should support the kind of citizens that Mauritius wants for its future and, as such, the students who are Mauritius’s future must understand our democratic system, their human rights, the importance of voting, and law and order issues.

In contrast, a senior educator believed that learning the basics of the political system at an early stage is sufficient since pupils are already overloaded with dozens of subjects in secondary school. One of the social studies teachers stated that they saw politics as a vicious circle, noting some negative images of our politicians, and proposed that the introduction of civic education would be a waste of time. This dichotomy between the views of this small sample of ministers and educators is by no means conclusive, but it does highlight some potential rifts in seeking to advance civic engagement education in Mauritius.
Informal interviews with a small sample of Mauritius students reveal some possible consequences of the lack of civic education. A quasi-structured survey was given in December 2017 to 200 secondary school and college students, which included 38.5% males and 61.5% females. While more research is needed to clarify results, one theme was clear—a large majority did not understand even basic components of the government and how it works. These students have experienced the new curriculum, and the results suggest that the lack of civic education is impacting their ability to engage as knowledgeable and active citizens.

Educating for Mauritian Democracy: An Example of Needs for the Future

Mauritius is at a crossroads in its political future. The generation which built its independence is retiring, and the newest generation has not received a comprehensive education in politics and citizenship. This lack of knowledge about how their government works is certain to have negative consequences for the democracy that previous generations sought to establish after centuries of colonial rule. Youth comprise just over one-third of the population, and if their civic education is neglected, this situation could be dangerous for democracy.

Further, researchers face other challenges in collecting and evaluating accurate data about youth participation because key data, such as voting participation by age group, is not gathered by the government. Much political participation data is not gathered by ethnicity as government leaders in the early days of Mauritian democracy were concerned that requiring reporting by ethnicity could exacerbate existing ethnic tensions. Yet, data by age group in measurable areas such as voting could help policymakers, educators, and researchers discern where gaps in political participation exist for all groups. This information also could point to interventions in the educational system, especially the secondary education years that lead directly into voting and adulthood, which could support the future of democracy in Mauritius and in other countries with a colonial history and fairly new democratic governments. Finally, while relative economic prosperity in the past 50 years has helped to stabilize Mauritian democracy, the economic impacts of the pandemic on crucial sectors, such as tourism, demonstrate that this factor cannot be taken for granted as a structure to support democracy.

Overall, this chapter points to the role of education in the future of post-colonial democracies. Whether in multi-ethnic or homogenous contexts, poor or more developed economies, post-colonial democracies need to invest in quality, comprehensive civic engagement education and research at all levels, especially as the generations which fought to establish these democracies pass on governing to a new group. This next generation must have the tools to face increasing complexities and challenges to democracy at all levels of government.

Endnotes


18. The authors conducted eight interviews which included two former government ministers, one former member of parliament, one former adviser of a minister, one senior educator at the college level, one former college Rector, and two social studies teachers. Sample questions included: Is today’s generation interested in politics? Should the Ministry of Education implement civic education as a subject in the secondary curriculum? How effective school would be to channel political orientations of students through civic education? While the university does not have an American-style institutional review board, a transcript of the interviews was provided to the book editors, and the interviewees were told that their comments would otherwise be kept anonymous.

19. Again, the university lacks a review board. The questions and answers were provided to the book editors for review.

20. CIA, “Mauritius.”