

## The Development and Consolidation of Moral Identity and Civic Awareness Among Students As a Result of SARS Crisis

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The outbreak of SARS has called upon both the government and every citizen in Hong Kong to reflect on the crisis. Education in post-SARS Hong Kong poses the opportunity for reestablishing and consolidating both the moral identity and civic awareness of the citizenry. Specifically, not only what cognitive attributes and civic values should be identified to promote the moral development of school children but attention should also be given to how they might be most effectively transmitted, selected, internalized and eventually become meaningful experience of our young adults. SARS as an unexpected crisis in this specific milieu will certainly have a profound effect on young individuals' forming and transforming the framework of moral basis and civic attributes in the society in the current time and beyond. It was documented that big event and crisis like the Iraq war could spark young individuals' moral identity and character (Damon, 2003).

Formal schooling has been well assumed as the locus for socialization of young individuals to take place and yet, little attention has been given to the study of those through informal mechanisms. Besides, it is often difficult to trace specific linkages, since so many different causal paths connect public life with the school system: linkages may involve influences from local communities and parents; a variety of professional elites; the authorities of the government and other social institutions such as the mass media. In a critical event like SARS, it is particularly important to take into consideration the effects on the social category of students, whether they are from the mainstream or marginal arenas of life. For one thing, a critical and comparative approach of studying both categories of young individuals will further expand our understanding of the dynamics of educational process; hence, more effective measures can be introduced to promote a functioning citizenry.

Consequently, our research effort is to investigate and compare both regular school and marginal youths who are also in their school age, or have left school not too long ago, taking into account their socio-economic background as well as their value orientation toward school and society by focusing on SARS as a mediating social incident. It is expected that unanticipated crisis such as the outbreak of SARS in Hong Kong engendered a niche for relocating values and the search for a broader meaning of a “good society” (Bellah et al, 1989). By studying social identification and moral orientations of both the regular and marginal students in Anti-SARS campaign, we can examine (a) their conceptions of their own social roles and position in a society; (b) expectation of roles of others in the same society, (c) the formative process of such conceptions, (d) the extent of schooling effect on engendering the moral identity and civic awareness among mainstream and marginal young individuals, and (e) whether or not a social consensus is present in appropriating the moral and civic responsibilities of a “good society” of Hong Kong. Within the context of these research inquiries, some major themes and issues that might also be present as intervening variables in the formation or facilitating of social identification and civic awareness will also be explored. These themes might include environmental and global awareness, guiding principles for social responsibilities, the potential contribution of religious institutions and other organized groups in society, the climate and channels for values debate, the balance between personal and social interest, the organizational linkage between educational rhetoric and the reality, pupil-choice based informal learning versus formal instruction as teaching strategies, etc. A comparison of regular students and marginal youths will also shed light on how education failure and social structural disadvantage may pose obstacles to the moral development and civic awareness of marginal youths in society.

The research will have important policy implications for the government. It aims at uncovering the process of diffusion, selectivity, and internalization of values among the Hong Kong public through an unexpected crisis like SARS, and most importantly, in what ways and to what extent formal educational organizations can help reshape and reinforce such values among young learning individuals.

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Bellah, R. et al. 1988. *Habits of the Heart*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Damon, W. 2003. <http://ed.stanford.edu/suse/home-boardview-link.html?table=notify1&menu=left05&id=130>