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'POLITICAL EDUCATION' IN A DEMOCRACY

A philosophical examination of some interpretations of 'political education' in New Zealand.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education at Massey University.

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ABSTRACT

'Political Education' in a Democracy.

A philosophical examination of some interpretations of 'political education' in New Zealand.

This thesis seeks to examine formal, informal and non-formal aspects of 'political education' in New Zealand. There is not only an attempt to expose political components of what is apparently an apolitical or non-political school system, but also to explore politically-educative characteristics of other agencies. Its aim is to clarify the relationships between politics and education.

The first chapter examines the word 'democracy' and tries to discover the kinds of functions which a democratic society might require of its education system. The idea that political education occupies a key role in the continuance of democracy is advanced, and the adequacy of New Zealand education in relation to meeting the necessary requirements is evaluated.

Further chapters deal with four possible interpretations of 'political education' in a democracy. Chapter two is concerned with the transmission of tradition and conformity. Chapter three deals with the maintenance of the system - how education serves as a recruiting agency. The fourth Chapter looks at 'political' aspects of civics and citizenship education, while Chapter five discusses political skills and knowledge - both their importance to a democratic system and their manifestation in New Zealand society. Running through the examination of these 'possible interpretations' is an evaluation of them in relation to democratic practices and ideals.

In the final chapter, it is suggested that in terms of the requirements of democratic society in a rapidly changing world, New Zealand's 'political education' might be seen as both inadequate and unsatisfactory. It is recommended that greater emphasis be placed on the development of political skills and knowledge in the school system.
People learn about politics in several environments. Home, school and community are among the settings from which they acquire skills, knowledge, attitudes and values that encourage or inhibit political activity.

This thesis is about some of the agencies, practices and processes involved in 'political education' in New Zealand, and in particular, about the ways in which schools and other formal, informal and non-formal educational organisations, deliberately or incidentally influence the political attitudes and activities of citizens in a democracy. Although the emphasis is upon schools, which are in a strong position to exert influence on their students - both specific and overt, as well as general and covert - other agencies are also discussed.

The approach is conceptual - in that I confine myself to ideas and arguments - rather than empirical. This does not constitute an under-playing of the importance of, or need for empirical surveys although Holly's observation (1972) that:

"The mass survey is the very stuff of one dimensional rationality, the pretence that by a streamlined technique you have captured reality...." (1)

highlights the need for thinking and analysis prior to any empirical study of political education. Furthermore, Crick (1970) says:

"Never has there been a time more ripe for constructive social and political thinking."

(2)

That the language of politics tends to be loose and confusing may act as an obstruction to clear thinking. Although there are no attempts at rigorous definition, three of the key words - "politics", "education", and "democracy" are discussed early in the thesis. The first chapter is devoted to an examination of democracy and the kinds of demands a democratic society might make on its education system.

The rest of the thesis deals with four major areas of political education, chosen to represent areas of skills and attitudes which are, to varying degrees, the concern of school and
society, and are open to educational influence. Chapter two on 'tradition and conformity', deals with transmission of culture both in and out of school. The third chapter, on 'recruitment', lays more stress on the preparatory function of schools in terms of both manpower and societal roles - the part schools play in affecting subsequent careers, occupations and social statuses. Chapter four discusses civics and citizenship programmes and their 'political' functions in a democracy, while the fifth chapter deals with the teaching and acquisition of political knowledge and skills.

Throughout, I have attempted to draw together many strands of social and political experience which may constitute 'political education' and have tried to explore some of the inter-relationships between education and politics. For as Holly (1972) states:

"Not only must politics in particular, not be taken out of education - it can't be.
Nor can education be taken out of politics:
they are mutually inextricable and each is bound up with society."

Because of the lack of research literature relating to New Zealand political education, sources referred to are taken from related fields. It might be objected that the use of quotations to support arguments constitutes 'arguing from authority'. However, the intention is to report (and examine) some of the published and stated observations of what is considered to be the case in New Zealand schools and society as well as some of the views of political philosophers and educational theorists. While these do not purport to be 'facts', they represent some of the assumptions, beliefs and values being discussed in this thesis.

I wish to thank my supervisor, David Stenhouse, for his valuable guidance, suggestions and criticisms.

References
(1) Holly, Douglas "Schools Society and Humanity" (1972) p.99.
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