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History, Political Literacy and Indoctrination

1. INTRODUCTION

A controversial problem area which arises when considering a child's education, is the problem of political education. There are many opposing and conflicting viewpoints on the situation - from those who believe that it is not the duty of the school to develop a child's level of political literacy to those who believe that it is essential for the school to prepare the child for life, with politics being a central part of life.

The whole question concerning political education is, of course, highly debatable, giving rise to many issues. One of these issues is why teach children politics at school when they can and will learn about it somewhere else? A second area of concern involves the problem of indoctrination - is it possible to provide a political education programme that does not indoctrinate pupils? Thirdly, is it the duty of the school to educate pupils politically, and if this is so, then how should political education be taught at school? And perhaps most importantly, is there actually a need for political education?

It will be endeavoured during the course of the article to provide the answers to the above issues. Initially the concept of political literacy and the relationship between political literacy and political education will be discussed.

Secondly the question will be posed whether or not there is a need for political education at school, taking into account the aims of political education, and the possible danger areas which may be encountered. After this theoretical discussion, the results of a survey which was conducted at three high schools, will be interpreted. The relationship between the theory behind political education and the practical aspect will then become more clear. It is however first necessary to discuss "political literacy".

2. THE CONCEPT POLITICAL LITERACY

The term political literacy refers to the knowledge, attitudes and skills possessed by a person concerning politics. The politically literate person has a certain basic knowledge and understanding about a political issue and is able to understand other people's viewpoints. A politically literate person bases his attitudes on certain values and has the skill to become an active participant in the politics of the country concerned. Therefore, a politically literate person knows about political disputes, the different viewpoints found in these disputes and how they affect the public.¹ Because political literacy has to be learnt and therefore involves education it is, according to Trümpelmann, formative both as a process and as a product.² Education is therefore a necessary precondition for political literacy. When becoming politically literate the person acquires knowledge and develops skills i.e. to think critically, to be reasonable, open-minded, knowledgeable and able to become effectively involved in politics. Therefore, any person who participates in the political system of a democracy should have a certain level of political literacy.

But where does this political literacy come from if it involves an educational process?

3. THE NEED FOR POLITICAL EDUCATION AT SCHOOL

Because most of the pupils at present at school will one day become active participants in the democratic process by voting, it is essential that they learn about the political reality. Unfortunately however "Political activity is impossible without a certain kind of knowledge and a certain kind of education".³ Indeed, the quality and type of government of a democratic system depends on the ability and knowledge of the voters. If these voters do not have a certain level of political literacy they ought, in theory, not to vote because their vote most probably will be based on emotional rather than a rational appeal.

Children should indeed be given the chance to gain political knowledge in a planned and organised way, not just by coincidence. They should also be exposed to different ideas and viewpoints - not only those they encounter at home or through the media. Because it is the function of the school to educate and form the child to become a successful member of society, and because politics is an integral part of society, political education should take place at school. This political education should be direct and purposeful i.e. there should be a course specifically aimed at political education. For some people, like

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Crick, there is no issue surrounding the question of political education. Political education is accepted (by him) as a necessity and the issue revolves rather around whether this is done well or badly.⁴

It may be argued that a pupil does not normally get political education at school through subjects like History, Geography and Moral Preparedness. The political knowledge gained in this indirect way implies only certain elements of politics rather than actual political education. Because these subjects do not have the imparting of political knowledge as their main aim, politics is usually indirectly referred to. The effect of these subjects on political education is therefore minimal.⁵

Fact is, the success of the democratic form of government depends on the level of political literacy of the people in the given society. What is more, one of the basic ways to develop and increase political literacy is through education. As Julius Nyerere said, "People have to be educated in the democratic process".⁶

This political education should have a definite structure, as well as definite aims and objectives. The task of political education at school is to, firstly, provide information on the content and processes of its own and other political systems. It should secondly teach the child to identify with democratic values. It should also produce a readiness in the child to participate in the political system. Political education should fourthly help the child to learn to make independent unbiased judgements.⁷

This all sounds very positive and simple, but there are problem areas which can be and are encountered with political education at school.

4. PROBLEM AREAS RELATED TO POLITICAL EDUCATION AT SCHOOL

Political education at school in Britain has been widely criticized and one of the main reasons for this criticism is fear of indoctrination. Indoctrination at school occurs when a teacher attempts to teach the children something while disregarding or misrepresenting existing evidence, or without evidence at all.⁸ This can easily occur in political education if the teacher does not have the correct approach and training. If the teacher teaches with the ultimate aim of converting all the pupils to her political viewpoint, her teaching will invariably be one sided and could lead to indoctrination. It is also, on the other hand, impossible for a teacher to be totally objective and unbiased when teaching political education. So, although bias on the part of the teacher cannot be eliminated, it must be recognised and taken into account. A teacher who indoctrinates purposefully though, is dishonest and this results in the child just replacing one prejudice with another.⁹

De Beer, in a report entitled "Diplomatieke en politieke skoling van die jeug teen 'n omvangryke bedreiging" describes the total "onslaught" which threatens South Africa.¹⁰ Even from the title it is clear that the aim of political education, as he presents it, involves indoctrination with a one sided view on the threat of communism in South Africa. No other viewpoints or explanations contrary to his aim are given in the work, therefore one assumes that the children at school are not given different viewpoints which they can weigh up against each other. Instead of being balanced with an open, critical and enquiring mind, this type of political education would probably result in narrow minded, prejudiced children.

For political education to be successful, the teacher should present the subject and content in a balanced way, giving pupils a wide spectrum of alternative viewpoints from which they make their own deductions and form their own opinions. No opinions should be forced on the pupils because the teacher feels these opinions are "right". If however, pupils ask the teacher for her personal opinion, the teacher should give it. Pupils would then be encouraged to question and challenge the teacher's point of view.¹¹ Because political education should teach the child to think critically, it should actually prevent indoctrination because the child will learn to debate controversial issues. As Johnathan F. Brown put it: "A politically literate adult population produced by a systematic programme of political education in our schools and colleges is the best guarantee against the indoctrinator. Fear of indoctrination should not be a barrier to political education but rather a stimulus to its introduction and development."¹²

A condition for successful teaching of political education should be the training of the teacher. The teacher should be trained specifically in politics, either through in-service training or even better, through university education. Teachers should be kept up to date on political developments and should therefore have to go on refresher courses.¹³ It must be noted that although political education is criticised for fear that teachers will indoctrinate pupils, there have, according to Brennan, been few reports of problems caused by indoctrination and bias in schools where political education is taught.¹⁴

From the above discussion it is evident that there is a great need for political education at school. But how do the pupils at school actually feel about the situation?

5. QUESTIONNAIRE

5.1 Introduction to Questionnaire and Survey

It was decided to conduct a survey to ascertain the level of political knowledge, especially concerning current affairs and viewpoints on contemporary controversial issues, of matric pupils at different schools. It is not possible, through such a survey, to determine how much the pupil knows about politics because the range of questions asked is not wide enough. It is however possible to determine what the pupil does not know and a lack of political knowledge is a likely predictor of a low level of political literacy.

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The aim with the survey was to find out:

- * how political aware the pupils were
- * whether or not there was a difference in the results of the different schools
- * whether there was a difference between the results of pupils who take history and those who do not, i.e. the relationship between history and political literacy
- * and finally, and most importantly, to find out whether the pupils themselves felt they were politically literate and whether they felt that some form of political education at school was necessary.

The survey involved 103 pupils from three different high schools, one near Johannesburg and the other two on the West Rand. The group was made up as follows:

- 1) School A - Coloured school near Johannesburg
 - 25 history pupils participated
 - 19 pupils not taking history
- 2) School B - Multiracial convent on the West Rand
 - 20 history pupils participated
- 3) School C - White upper middle class school on the West Rand (English)
 - 18 history pupils participated
 - 21 pupils not taking history

This survey group is not ideal because it is limited, but it was felt it would give at least an indication of the problem of political literacy. It would have been better to have included more pupils, especially Blacks and White Afrikaners in the study, but this was difficult to achieve because the survey necessitated a working relationship with specific teachers.

5.2 Description of Questionnaire

The questionnaire which was given to the pupils to complete, was made up of four sections (see Appendix A). Section A was a personal information section. Section B was made up of multiple choice questions concerning current world affairs. Section C consisted of longer questions in which pupils were expected to give their personal viewpoints on current South African issues. In Section D the pupils were expected to rate their level of political literacy and then say whether or not they felt political education at school was necessary.

5.3 Marking the Questionnaire

The difficulty with using a questionnaire in which pupils give personal feelings, lies in the interpretation of these answers. The answers to Section B were easy to evaluate - one mark was given for each correct answer, except in question 6 in which pupils got half a mark if they answered Coloureds. It was done because it was felt that a pupil

who doesn't know that the House of Representatives is made up of Indians, is not necessarily politically illiterate. If however, the pupil thinks that it is made up of Whites or Blacks, then it can be, to a greater extent, interpreted as political illiteracy. Therefore, in Section B pupils got a mark out of ten.

In Section C it was decided to rate the answers on a scale of 0-3 based on insight, understanding, empathy and logical reasoning. The answers were evaluated as follows:

- 0 - no answer
- 1 - yes or no, with little motivation e.g. "No, they are causing themselves more damage than SA itself".
- 2 - state viewpoint with motivation e.g. "No, sanctions hurt the people they are most trying to help".
- 3 - viewpoint given with good motivation which is logical, contains insight and awareness, e.g. "No. Although I believe that the South African reform process must be speeded up; stable political change cannot happen with an unstable economy. The outside world would be harming the people they are trying to help because if sanctions are complemented, the black man would be the first to lose his job. No man can be a patriot on an empty stomach".

Obviously, with this type of marking, it is easy to become subjective and penalise a pupil (consciously or unconsciously) for having what you feel to be an irrational or prejudiced viewpoint. It was therefore decided to mark the answers considering the way the pupil could motivate his/her viewpoint, no matter what this viewpoint was, provided that they demonstrated a high level of political knowledge and "understanding".

5.4 Results of the Questionnaires

Each paper which was handed back was marked and the results considered, irrespective of the fact whether the person who participated managed to complete the questionnaire or not.

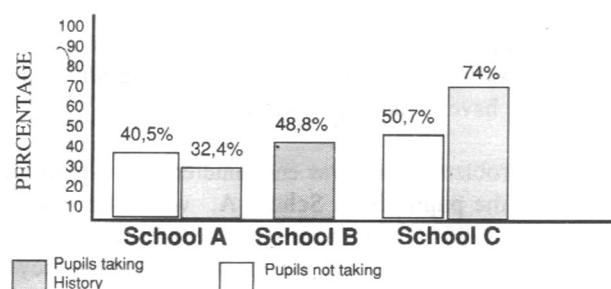
a) Section A

The numbers of pupils participating, and those who do and don't take history have been given at the beginning of the survey discussion. The average age of pupils participating in the survey from all the schools was 17 years. The control group was made up of 56 females (54.3% of the group) and 47 males (45.7% of the group). This section of the survey was used to get background of the participating pupils.

b) Section B

This was the multiple choice section of the questionnaire and the following results were achieved.

TABLE I



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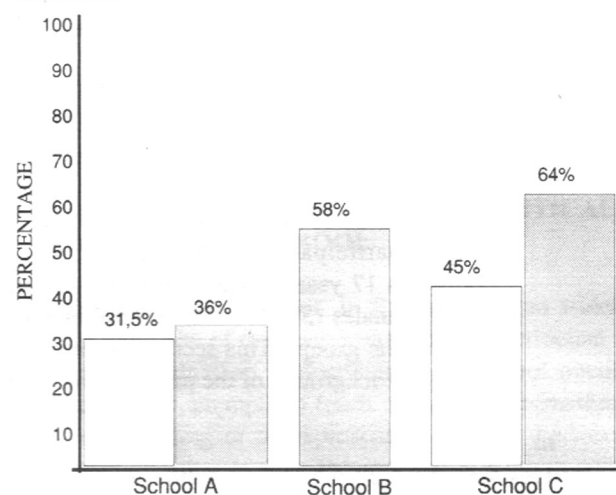
As can be seen from the table, the pupils from School A scored the lowest marks while pupils from School C scored the highest marks. The pupils not doing history at School A got higher marks than those doing history. The results of School C tend to reflect that these pupils doing history do have a better knowledge of current affairs. The results of these history pupils were substantially higher than non history pupils. One is inclined to assume that the average of 74% for the history pupils is a result of increased political knowledge gained because of the pupils' interest and desire to know more about political current affairs. This desire could be a result of an awareness created by the subject history and the way in which it is taught at the school. Many may say this is an unfounded generalisation, given the results of the survey. This is to a certain extent true, but due to personal knowledge of the school and the way history is taught at this school, these deductions are regarded as valid.

Most of the history teachers of the classes who did the questionnaire were shocked by the answers given by pupils on current affairs issues. This even led to the introduction in one school of a current affairs board so that pupils are able to keep up to date on current affairs.

C) Section C

After marking the questionnaires, the following results were obtained.

TABLE II



From the graph of the results, it is evident that the pupils doing history as a subject, scored higher marks than those not doing history, in the longer interpretive section. This could be because history pupils have more experience in answering these types of questions. (Questions in which they have to motivate their answer).

A problem which was encountered in the questionnaires of the pupils from School A, was that some of the pupils did not want to answer the questions in which they had to give personal viewpoints. Perhaps they thought

these opinions might be traced back to them, or maybe they just didn't want to share their viewpoints. One suspects that some of them would rather keep quiet than voice a controversial opinion. This reflects the fears of the community in which they live. As one girl put it, "I don't pay much attention to politics because it could land you up in detention." It is therefore felt that this problem may be a gap in the survey, but one that could not be avoided.

The history pupils from School C, on the other hand found it much easier to express their personal opinions. What was generally evident from their answers, was that they had thought about the issues before and had strong convictions concerning these issues. Many had deep insight and understanding of the problems and it could be a result of the way in which history is taught to them - they are exposed to different view-points. It is essential to emphasize though that it need not necessarily be history which has resulted in this awareness, but it could also be parental and home background, the influence of friends or the media.

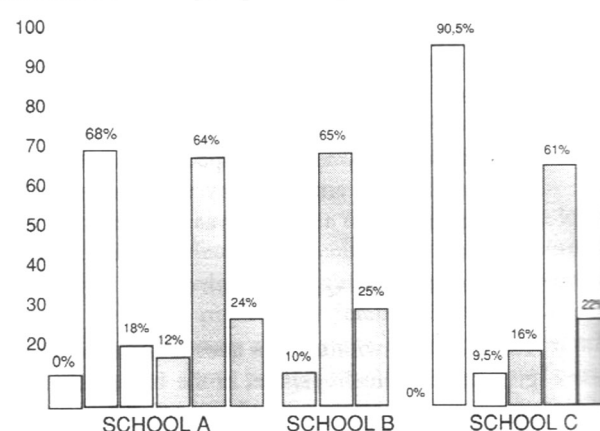
All in all, although there were some really good answers and interpretations, the answers were generally average. There were many typical stereotyped answers which showed a lack of understanding e.g. "Negotiations between the ANC and SA should not take place because the ANC will just stab us in the back like SWAPO did" (Could this be a parent talking?) One of the answers which was most interesting was from an 18 year old male from School A who said, in answer to question 5, that apartheid was the best way because if it was taken away the blacks who are in the majority would take over.

We thought that there would be a greater political awareness amongst Coloured students, but the survey group proved this hypothesis incorrect. This is of course a drawback with such a small control group because general tendencies and characteristics of the different groups cannot be picked up.

d) Section D

This was perhaps the most important and relevant section of the questionnaire because it concerned the pupils' feelings on political education.

TABLE III - Are you politically literate?

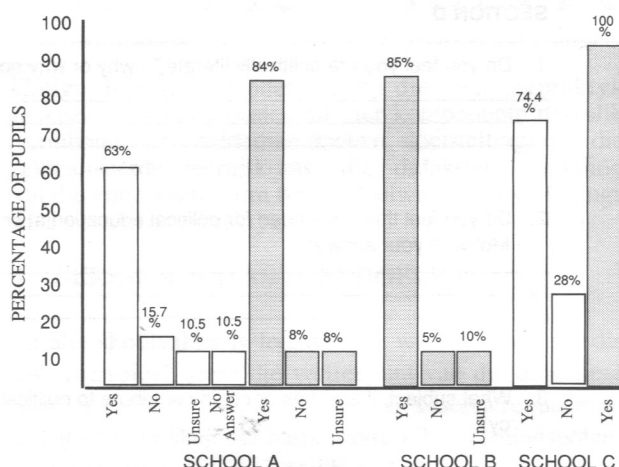


As is evident from Table III, very few pupils considered themselves to be politically literate. Most pupils from Schools B and C said this was because they were not

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exposed to politics. Many pupils from School A said that they were not interested in knowing anything about politics because this knowledge only brought trouble. This once again reflect th different systems in which these matric pupils live and function

TABLE IV: Is there a need for political education at school?



Closely related to Table III is Table IV in which a surprising majority of pupils voted in favour of political education at school. Most of the pupils from School A agreed that political education and knowledge was necessary for the future of the country. Those who disagreed and didn't want political education, said that it would disrupt the schools e.g. with boycotts, riots, etc.

Most pupils at School B were also in favour of political education, seeing it as a necessity for all citizens of the country. Some of the pupils qualified this though, saying that political education should be a choice subject. Those who disagreed with political education at school had the attitude that politics caused conflict. They therefore chose to ignore politics.

The pupils at School C were largely in favour of political education at school. The main reason given by them was that the youth are the future of the country and should therefore know about the politics of the country. Some pupils did however qualify political education by saying that it shouldn't be biased, the teacher should be good and there should be no indoctrination. The history pupils all agreed on the necessity of political education at school.

6. CONCLUSION

The most important and crucial factor emerging from the study is that the overwhelming majority of the pupils themselves, no matter what their personal belief or political convictions, classified themselves as politically illiterate and expressed a desire to have political education at school. No matter what theories, justifications and explanations are given by adults concerned about political education, the children themselves, involved in the

practical education situation, have yet again noticed that there is a gap in their education. We as educators cannot close our eyes or their eyes to this fact. It is our duty as educators to ensure that this gap is closed and that the young pupils' needs and desires are met.

FOOTNOTES

1. A. Porter (ed), Principles of Political Literacy, pl3.
2. M.H. Trümpelmann, Politieke Geletterdheid as Verantwoordelikheid van die Sekondêre Skool, pl6.
3. T. Brennan, Political Studies, pl0.
4. B. Crick, A. Porter, Political Education and Political Literacy, p5.
5. M.H. Trümpelmann, Politieke Geletterdheid ..., pl43.
6. Brennan, T., Political Education and Democracy, pl05.
7. Stradling, R., Political Education in West Germany and Britain, p33.
8. Stradling, R. (et al), Teaching Controversial Issues, pl O.
9. Wellington, J. (ed), Controversial Issues in the Curriculum, p26.
10. De Beer, K.J., Diplomatieke en Politieke Skoling.
11. Stradling, R., Teaching Controversial Issues, p9.
12. T. Brennan, Political Education and Democracy, p85.
13. A. Porter (ed), Principles of Political Literacy, p23.
14. T. Brennan, Political Education and Democracy, p93.

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APPENDIX A

HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire is an attempt to determine the level of political knowledge of matric pupils. Please answer the questions carefully and honestly.

SECTION A

1. Do you take history as a school subject?
2. Age:
3. Sex:

SECTION B

Cross the correct letter.

1. The CP is a political party.
 - a) left wing
 - b) right wing
 - c) moderate

2. The leader of SWAPO is

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- a) Jonas Savimbi
- b) Joshua Nkomo
- c) Sam Nujoma

3. Inkatha represents the _____ people.

- a) Zulu
- b) Sotho
- c) Venda

4. The South African form of government is

- a) a one party state
- b) a democracy
- c) white minority rule

5. A communist state has a _____ economic system.

- a) capitalist
- b) socialist
- c) mixed

6. The House of Delegates is made up of

- a) Whites
- b) Coloureds
- c) Indians
- d) Blacks

7. The new Democratic Party is a coalition between

- a) The NP and the PFP
- b) The IP and NDM
- c) The PFP, IP and NDM

8. South Africa is under a state of emergency

- a) True
- b) False
- c) Unsure

9) Who is the Secretary General of the United Nations?

- a) Chester Crocker
- b) Martti Ahtisaari
- c) Perez de Cuellar

10) Gorbachev's new policy is called

- a) Nasdarovia
- b) Glasnost
- c) Presdva

Section C

Answer the following questions to the best of your ability in the space provided. Remember, there are no right and wrong answers - write what you feel is correct.

1. Do you feel that economic sanctions against SA are justified or not. Why?

2. What are the pros and cons of the "Volkstaat" concept?

3. Do you believe that negotiations between the South African government and the ANC should take place or not, motivate your answer?

4. What is the difference between Western democracy and People's Democracy (as found in some Eastern block Communist countries?)

5. Is South Africa in a unique situation as far as racism is concerned? (give reasons for your answer)

SECTION D

1. Do you feel you are politically literate? - why or why not?

2. Do you feel there is a need for political education at school? Motivate your answer.

3. What subject, if any, has or could contribute to political literacy?
