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Viewpoint: Values, politics and the schools

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Viewpoint

Values, politics and the schools

Who would deny that values are inherent in schooling or that politics plays an important part in the process of formal education? Yet as obvious as these facts would appear, many otherwise knowledgeable people would deny any essential connection between the two. While they might go so far as to say that schooling, now and in the past, has been frequently infected by political considerations, they would not see these considerations as either necessary or desirable. Thus, the way is cleared for those who would get down to the practical business of teaching, as if hesitating to consider the whys and wherefores of the case were some sort of crime against the young.

The most recent large scale example of this can be found in the swing of American schooling to the political right. Educational research is now turning up results that support a more conservative social climate, just as in the 1960's it uncovered results that sustained an atmosphere of reform. It is no more accidental that educators are (re)discovering the need for "basic subjects" (to say nothing of moral training) and are pondering the importance of mental discipline and civility, than it was that a decade ago they found out (once again) that "flexibility" and "openness" are essential for sound psychological development and the emergence of an independent and critical mind.

It would be easy to despair, looking at the cyclical nature of these trends. Where normally we would like our values to dictate our politics, it seems that in this case the reverse is true. That is to say, the virtues we promote in the schools appear to be a mere reflection of prevailing political forces. Is there any hope founded on reason that it might be otherwise?

While there may be no simple answer to this question, we need not conclude that the situation warrants cynicism. In the first place, we should recognize the perennial tension in education between its adjustment function and its liberating function. On the one hand, education helps the learner to adapt to the world, to "fit in," so to speak. On the other hand, education works to free the learner from environmental constraints, to develop an inquisitive and critical intelligence that will generate an aptitude for change. An education that could not fulfill both of these functions would be hardly worthy of the name. Yet, in recognizing this, we are acknowledging a conflict which normally we can neither understand nor resolve in purely rational terms.

Living with these circumstances, what alternative do we have other than to trust the dialectical workings of the political process? Where we are unable to achieve a conceptual integration of the contradictory forces in education, where a philosophical synthesis is unattainable, we might still be able to bring about a political synthesis. This would demand, of course, that the political process be appropriately democratic, that political power be distributed and used in a manner that is scrupulously fair. But given this proviso, we might not only find practical solutions to practical problems, but, perhaps too, a basis for dealing with the philosophical perplexities that accompany our involvement in this wondrous business of education.

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