

DEMOCRACY, SCHOOLING AND POLITICAL EDUCATION

Colin Wringe

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Democracy, Schooling and Political Education

COLIN WRINGE

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Editors' Foreword

Books that are available to students of philosophy of education may, in general, be divided into two types. There are collections of essays and articles making up a more or less random selection; and there are books which explore a single theme or argument in depth but, having been written to break new ground, are often unsuitable for general readers or those near the beginning of their course. The Introductory Studies in Philosophy of Education are intended to fill what is widely regarded as an important gap in this range.

The series aims to provide a collection of short, readable works which, besides being philosophically sound, will appeal to future and existing teachers without a previous knowledge of philosophy or philosophy of education. In planning the series account has necessarily been taken of the tendency of present-day courses to follow a more integrated and less discipline-based pattern than formerly. Account has also been taken of the fact that three- and four-year students, as well as those on shorter postgraduate and in-service courses, quite rightly expect their theoretical studies to have a clear bearing on their work in the classroom. Each book, therefore, starts from a real and widely recognised area of concern in the educational field, and explores the main philosophical approaches which illuminate and clarify it. Attention is paid to the work of both mainstream philosophers and philosophers of education. For students who wish to pursue particular questions in depth, each book contains a bibliographical essay or substantial list of suggestions for further reading. A full range of the main topics recently discussed by philosophers of education will eventually be covered by the series.

Besides having considerable experience in the teaching of philosophy of education, the majority of authors writing in the series have already received some recognition in their particular fields. In addition, therefore, to reviewing and criticising existing work, each author has his or her own positive contribution to make to further discussion.

In *Democracy, Schooling and Political Education* it is argued that teachers cannot adequately comprehend their own activity in abstraction from its social and political context. Following a brief exposition and critique of current interpretations of democracy, a number of apparent dilemmas facing the democrat in relation to schooling are examined in detail.

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These relate to the function of education in an unequal society, recently renewed arguments in favour of selection and private education, the government of educational institutions and the nature of the relationship between education and democracy.

Special attention is reserved for recent work in the highly contentious field of political education, a number of conflicting approaches to which are critically discussed.

Philip Snelders
Colin Wringer

1

Education and Society

To many teachers and prospective teachers, talk of democracy in connection with education will provoke a reaction of impatience. The current fashion is for practical skills which will enable one to survive in the classroom. No doubt such skills are important, for without this basic equipment both our own and our pupils' time is wasted. But it is the implied contention of this book, and of others in the same series, that the obverse of the coin, impatience with all discussion of the social and political significance of our work, is misguided.

Teachers, it will be argued, cannot in the nature of things be mere operatives furnished with skills to be applied as they are directed. Their perception of the social and political context in which they do their work has an important effect on the nature of their job and the work they have to do. Their understanding of that context will necessarily influence their day-to-day activities in the classroom and make a difference both to what they teach and to how they teach it.

Perhaps one of the most obvious facts about teaching is that it is a communicating and, some would add, a controlling occupation. This is a feature which it shares with other occupations such as journalism, the law, the church and perhaps industrial and other kinds of management. These are all occupations concerned with passing on information, ideas, beliefs, instructions, with getting people to do certain things and behave in certain ways.

Such occupations may be contrasted with others, at all levels of society, which are not primarily communicating occupations. These include medicine and engineering, as well as such mundane jobs as plumbing or work in a factory. The best way of fitting an extra U-bolt or removing an appendix, or whether it is desirable to attempt these things at all, will probably be largely unaffected by whether one is in Moscow, Capetown, or New York. Any differences in what the surgeon does will largely depend on the skills and resources available, rather than on the political set-up under which the activity is performed.

With teaching, things are somewhat different. One might think that the best way of teaching pupils to solve quadratic equations or understand a simple text in a foreign language would be more or less universal and depend on established facts about the psychology of human learning, but even this is questionable. The way in which teachers and pupils deal with each other will reflect the relations of command and obedience prevailing and thought desirable in society generally. This in turn affects the range of teaching strategies acceptable to teachers and pupils. The mix of rote learning backed up by threat of punishment, discussion, pupil inquiry, teacher-centred and pupil-centred activity likely to be used for teaching what is ostensibly the same piece of material is not simply a matter of recognised technical efficiency, but will vary from time to time and place to place.

In particular, the extent to which it is thought permissible and desirable to encourage people to question what is said by someone in authority and the extent to which it is expected that such a person will explain and give reasons for what he says will also affect the way teachers teach, as well as the way in which pupils come to understand what they are taught.

Not only will the regime under which the teacher works affect the teaching methods he uses; it is certain to have an even more obvious influence on the content of what is taught. The authorities in most countries will be concerned that teachers should not undermine public order by subverting the assumptions and values of their particular state. Education is not simply the mindless passing on of a body of facts. Usually it is regarded as some kind of preparation for the future lives of pupils as members of their particular society. Consequently, both the beliefs and values and the information which educators are expected to transmit and give emphasis to will depend on what it is thought important for future citizens of that society to know.

Teachers are not, of course, bound to aim simply to reproduce in the next generation the society in which they currently work. Pupils have to be taught to 'cope with', to make something of, the world in which they will lead their adult lives. But such coping may not consist of enthusiastically embracing and supporting the values expressed by the society as it exists at present. It may consist of stoically grinning and bearing what cannot yet be altered, or it may consist of a determination to reform or change the current pattern of things.

The content of education reflects not only the way things are but also the way the adult generation, including teachers, think they ought to be. Teachers often aspire to make the next generation in some way better than the last. The desire to build a better – more virtuous, more powerful, juster, or in our own day simply more affluent – society often receives considerable social and official approval.