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Editorial

Authoritarianism and education

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Introduction

This journal has thus far avoided focusing on the discussion of the effects of politics in education. Politics is a given in education. It tends to reflect the ideology of a dominant party about how and what students learn. The effects of the space race in the 1960s on curricula in Western nations exemplify. Politics today is different, much more existential and angrier, and it portends significant epistemological changes in education and in society itself.

Politics and education have always walked together, but the relationship has risen to new intensities. Educators have struggled for several years now to adapt to increasingly authoritarian pressures from political forces. Social scientists need to respond to these heightened realities and focus more intensely but impartially on how political dynamics affect the future of education.

I specifically address movements that are shifting Western society, in particular from liberal democracies to totalitarian governments. The movement is arguably most evident in the United States but is also strong in European nations (e.g., the Red Ladies in England or neo-Nazi-ism in other European countries). Liberal democracy is characterized by the rule of law rather than the preferences of people in power, by checks and balances that ensure such rule, and universal suffrage. Such societies are liberal because they emphasize the rights of individuals and the primacy of human welfare. Authoritarian governments emphasize the opposite, the subjugation of the rule of law and human welfare to preferences for power and control.

Liberal Democracy vs Totalitarianism

In education, there are important battlefields in which the struggle over democracy vs totalitarianism is evident. Free speech has long been important in democracies but anathema to totalitarian governments. Free speech advocates understand that such freedom is a bedrock of democracy; it is critical for the development of new ideas, for social health, and the refinement of societal stability. Totalitarian governments oppose free speech because it threatens their control. This battle was particularly evident on college campuses during the Israeli-Gaza war. In the US, speech about the war was protected by the 1st Amendment to this nation's Constitution, but was used as evidence of excessive, alleged liberalism and antisemitic sentiments by authoritarians. The issue of hate speech was likewise weaponized and used by both pro-democracy and totalitarian advocates. Hate speech is not generally protected by the Constitution (particularly if it creates harm against others), but it is difficult to define the

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boundaries of such speech. Most particularly, alleged anti-sematic hate speech (defined by authoritarians as any speech critical of Israel's activities) was used by authoritarian supporters to influence public opinion about claimed prejudice. It was used consequently to control education and sanction critics of the war and its devastation.

Authoritarian-oriented advocates have been particularly assertive in efforts to control public media. There have, for example, been transparent efforts to pressure news outlets to terminate comedians they find threatening, to remove news programming that contradicts their ideology, and to impugn the credibility of information that the media reports. They accomplish the latter by challenging or spreading false information or conspiracies.

Authoritarians have sought to control and channel curriculum and to challenge the credibility of knowledge. Perhaps the most egregious example is the threat to severely cut funding to US universities that do not sign agreements that give government officials significant control over what is taught in classrooms and to punish faculty who teach ideas anathema to authoritarian ideology. In pre-college education, there are efforts to sanitize history books to better represent Western, white male history and to downplay the successes of non-Western and non-white history. Censorship of books in libraries has become a large issue in many states. Truth has been misrepresented to support preferred realities (e.g., the conspiracy theory movement).

Finally, I draw attention to the degradation of the rights and welfare of individuals, which cuts to the heart of liberal democracy. There are powerful efforts to delete any school program related to equity in schools or that teaches about the oppression of individuals. The agreements that the US government has imposed on Harvard University and other schools are a prime example of this.

The Future of Education

Doubtless, then, liberal democracy and educational autonomy (among other things) are under fire. An issue we should address in this journal is how harm to democracy would affect education. If we don't resist such attacks, will we open doors for non-democratic forces to become leaders in education, technology, research, and medicine? If yes, what effect will we see on these outcomes? Will schools become centers of indoctrination rather than institutions of rational exploration? Will curriculum and carriers of knowledge be recognizable in another decade?

A key dynamic is the important role of agility and diversity in fostering change, learning, exploration, and creativity (Marion, 2013). Democracies deliver this flexibility, and, on what some would consider a more exploitive side, it delivers resources needed to enable the production of change.

Will authoritarian governance, with its ability to control access to resources and to standardize mission and processes, be able to centralize and coordinate such massive tasks? Universities that are run by authoritarian political structures centralize decisions about what will be studied, who will receive support, and what will be taught. In schools for younger students, authoritarian leadership can determine the perspective of society that schools should portray and present an appropriate curriculum for that perspective. Can this also deliver change and creativity?

My images above of authoritarian dynamics exemplify how authoritarians historically envision effective governance: controlled societies can function effectively. In a sense, it is Max

Weber's bureaucracy with a personal rather than rules-based organization structure. But its Achilles heel may be the over-dependence on personal control and the resultant failure to engage organic, interactive processes (Rosenhead et al., 2019).

> But is democracy becoming anachronistic? Can we survive with a society as large as it is becoming? Is the world too populated to be organized for productive use with either democracy or authoritarianism? Research on physical systems along with observation of animal and plant evolution suggest that excessive pressure such as society faces will lead to massive systemic change. This change can lead to structures that can deal with pressures and supplant both democracy and authoritarianism (Bak, 1996).

I propose that diversity of ideas and preferences is crucial to society's future success. Does authoritarianism threaten the diversity generated naturally by democracy, or will it destroy the successes democratic societies enjoy? Is there a benefit from recent political changes?

I have allowed myself to explore some rather tentative ideas, and I encourage others to do likewise. But central questions remain: Is society drifting into authoritarian waters? How can we deal with it, and how will this movement affect education? It is the position of this journal that democracy is too valuable a jewel to lose and that authoritarianism is a proximal and immediate danger to our society. But I have illustrated with my ramblings that the shift, despite our gut feelings about it, must be explored with impartiality. We seek truth, not more self-serving conjectures.

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