

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 059 929

SO 002 272

AUTHOR Engle, Shirley H.
TITLE The Social Studies Teacher: Agent of Change
(Realities of the Political System). The Ideal and
the Reality.
PUB DATE 5 Nov 71
NOTE 23p.
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Activism; Administrator Responsibility; Change
Agents; *Citizenship; Citizenship Responsibility;
*Civics; Democracy; *Democratic Values; Educational
Change; Educational Philosophy; Instructional
Improvement; Political Socialization; Schools; Social
Action; Social Change; *Social Studies; Speeches;
Teacher Responsibility; Teachers; Teaching Models

ABSTRACT

The goal of civic education in a democracy must be mindful political activism. If civic education is to have a positive effect on the development of this activism: 1) it must provide curricular content which reflects the reality of political/social life; and, 2) teachers and administrators must exemplify, in and out of school, a model of active and mindful civic behavior worthy of emulation, and the school as an institution should furnish a model of such behavior. On both counts, I must be very critical of the reality of American education. The greatness of America is exaggerated; its problems, mistakes and weaknesses are minimized or ignored; and, little heed is given to how political and economic power has been and continues to be exercised. Schools are concerned more with maintaining authority and exacting obedience than with building self-esteem and individuality. And, while teachers may rule the school with an iron hand, they are notoriously placid and uninspiring citizens. The real trouble lies with a conception of education which, if it was ever valid, no longer fits our circumstances. It is time that American education outgrows its babysitting, propagandistic role, that it abandon its pretense to be the guardian of all wisdom, that it be more willing to share its problems and perplexities with youth, and devote itself to the cultivation of moral sensibility and intellectual honesty. (Author/AWW)

Shirley R. Engle
11/5/71

SO

The Social Studies Teacher:
Agent of Change (Realities of the Political System)

The Ideal and the Reality

I have taken the liberty to sub-title my paper "The Ideal and the Reality." This will give me the option of treating the reality not only as it is today, but as it must become if democracy is to survive.

It is imperative in a democracy that the citizen be active for the causes in which he believes. Activism may be directed at conserving present value or it may be directed at changing a present condition or injustice. The ideal end to be sought is mindful and socially responsible activism. We neither want to create a society of revolutionaries nor a society dominated by the status quo. Mindful change for the improved quality of all our lives is the only reasonable goal. In a democracy, this must mean the encouragement of mindful non-conformism as well as of mindful conformism. Mindless conformity and obedience, frequently confused with patriotism, is not consistent with democracy; it is a travesty on democracy to teach children blind patriotism.

ED 059929

SP 002272

Democracy was born in an act of disobedience--it could easily die in an act of obedience. The greatest courage required of the citizen is that of standing for what he believes is right, in opposition, if need be, to the majority. Abraham Lincoln recognized this truth when he said, "It is a sin to be silent when it is your duty to protest."

Democracy is a pragmatic philosophy unburdened by dogmas except that which respects the right of the individual to participate in political choice. For democracy to work, the citizen must want to participate in the decision making process, he must be protected in this right and he must believe in his own intelligence and political efficacy. At the same time, he must respect the opinion of others for under the rules of democracy, minority opinion may become majority opinion, as it frequently does in the United States.

The goal of civic education in a democracy must be mindful political activism. In such a society, the end in view is the progressive resolution of social ills and the improvement of society. This should never be confused with mere social tranquility or with the suppression of the aggrieved. In the words of B. F. Skinner, "The only geniuses produced by the chaos of society are those who do something about it."

In this view, education should look with favor on the recent upsurge of student activism in the United States. It is not a phenomenon to be spurned or suppressed, but rather to be cultivated and directed into useful channels of public service and individual self-fulfillment. It is the citizen who is passive, indifferent, or skeptical of democratic institutions that pose the greater threat to American democracy. The most frightening aspect of the American situation today is the growing number of our young citizens who doubt the credibility of the system or have lost hope that we can rectify cancerous social ills. To the extent that the schools have produced mindful activism, we have succeeded; to the extent that we have produced indifference, we have failed democracy.

Many school people disclaim responsibility for today's student activism, fearing to be seen in the public eye as a divisive influence or as sowing discontent with the status quo. It is doubtful, however, that schools can claim the credit for student activism, for the heavy weight of education is clearly on the side of mindless obedience and conformity to the status quo. Student activism is better explained by the out-of-school experiences of youth in a world of instant information

via modern media, a world which finds it increasingly difficult to hide from the view of youth the discrepancies between the ideal and the realities of the social scene whether at home or in far away Vietnam. There is the possibility that student activism is a reaction to the mindless unreality of the school in the face of modern instant access to information from the real world. Many students, frequently including the most intelligent, are fed up with the "we are the greatest, all is right with the world" versions of society taught in school, which are in such vivid contrast to the tensions and catastrophic problems bannered on daily newspapers every day. There is also the possibility that a credibility gap exists between students and the school establishment because the school establishment does not reflect participatory democracy. Rather than from among their teachers, students find their civic heroes among their own peers or among those in the world of art or music.

The stand I am taking is not for more student activism merely for the sake of activism. We have student activism in America already on a scale never dreamed of a mere five or ten years ago. A very intelligent and articulate minority of the students in every high school and college

in America and in many elementary schools are in well reasoned rebellion against the bureaucratic lock step of the American educational system. Polls indicate that well over half of the student population in American schools covertly support this rebellion. If we count among the rebellious those who have pre-maturely dropped out of school and, more significantly, those who, while remaining in school, have simply turned us off and are no longer listening to our shop worn prescriptions, it becomes clear that our schools face a major crises of wills. It is not more of this kind of confrontation nor is it more repressive measures that are needed. Rather it is the opening up of new channels of communication and interaction both among students and between students and adults that is imperative. Children are right in insisting that education somehow speak more clearly to the problems of America and they are right, in the face of so much uncertainty, that education be freer than it is; that in a nation which professes democratic principles, schools must themselves be symbols of democracy. They are right in resisting the mindless and senseless tasks to which they are too often set in school. They are right in resisting the heavy bureaucracy and authoritarianism so common in the American

educational establishment. But mere negative activism arising out of exasperation and disillusionment with the system does not add up to a good education. It does afford the opportunity and the drive for reforms in education long overdue. Student activism should be seized upon as an opportunity; to treat it as an ill is to run the risk of destroying all that is positive in the American democratic system.

Having said this, I shall make two claims concerning the teacher and civic education as follows:

1) If civic education is to have a positive effect on the development of responsible student activism, it must provide curricular content which reflects the reality of political and social life; mythological heroes' tales, and oversimple or clearly biased versions of history and current affairs will no longer do. In short, those engaged in civic education must insist on the right and must rigidly adhere to the principle of "telling it like it really is", the dross along with the good.

2) If civic education is to have a positive affect in developing mindful student activism, teachers and school administrators must exemplify, in their own style of living, in and out of school, a model

of active and mindful civic behavior worthy of emulation. The school as an institution should also furnish a model of such behavior. I shall discuss each of these claims briefly under the complementary headings, the reality and the ideal.

Does the school curriculum reflect honestly the reality of political and social life? I regret to say the answer seems to be no. What children get in school is a vastly over-simplified, romanticized version of American history and political life, past and present. The greatness of America is exaggerated, its problems, mistakes, and weaknesses are minimized or ignored. For instance, the great miscarriages of justice toward blacks, American Indians, and other minorities in the history of this country are glossed over or misrepresented. While considerable attention is paid to abstract forms of government and economy, little heed is given to how political and economic power has been and continues to be exercised in actuality. And public affairs are generally interpreted from a white, protestant, middle class point of view. The points of view of the less opulent and less prestigious are ignored or soft pedaled. Indeed by setting middle class beliefs as the guiding criteria, minorities are

made to seem unworthy of respect without this ever being said in so many words. It is little wonder that so many of the children of the poor, the ghetto, the rural impoverished and of racial minorities either turn us off or drop out of American education.

A number of serious studies of American Civic education substantiate this conclusion. I can cite two. Robert Hess of Stanford University who made a careful study of political learning in the schools concludes: "the schools have contributed to divisions within the society by teaching a view of the nation and its political processes which is incomplete and simplistic, stressing values and ideals but ignoring social realities ... the main type of civic education stresses character building and respect for rules and authority, under cutting the creation of urgency about change and the solution of problems . . . civic education emphasizes the vote and minimizes other political processes . . . it creates distaste in children for conflict and division within the society thereby fostering avoidance of unpleasant social and political facts."

Another researcher, Edgar Litt, finds that in civic education we discriminate, unthinkingly, between the children of low and high social

economic groups teaching the former a view which has governmental institutions working in harmony for the benefit of citizens while we teach the latter how politics really works and how the system is used by those who seek to advance their interests.

Why do we perpetrate this hoax upon American children and youth? We believe, I think falsely, that children are too young to handle the full truth or that children must be socialized by their elders before they can be trusted with sensitive and really important matters. It is my belief that character and intellectual and social stability in youth are not built by spoon feeding and overprotecting them against the day when they will be told suddenly, "It wasn't that way at all." In contrast, the trauma of such a reversal, coupled as it must be with overtones of misplaced trust, may seriously unhinge all but the strongest of personalities. Character is better built on the progressive development of a sense of success in dealing with reality. The individual who has experienced real success as well as some failure, the person who has learned from positive direct experience that problems, both personal and societal, can be dealt with, the person who has learned to have some

confidence in human problem solving ability is less likely to panic in the face of future problems of even greater social magnitude. As Bruner has indicated, the only way to learn to solve problems is by engaging in solving them.

To protect youth from the arena of social problems until such time as some kind of basic indoctrination has been accomplished or until he has presumedly a sufficient storehouse of information is bankrupt on still another count. There is no possibility, given modern media and modern exposure to a variety of influences, for youth to grow up innocent of the problems which beset our society. To attempt such is only to make the school appear ridiculous. Crime, drugs, wars, poverty, pollution, political and economic cupidity, moral uncertainty are everyday events in the life of youth today. There is no longer any age of innocence.

In part, our lack of candor with youth also stems from our perception of education as primarily the transmission of knowledge from the older and supposedly learned to the young and untutored. Knowledge in this view takes on the nature of something immutable to be mastered or memorized without being turned over in the mind or questioned. Out of such a notion

comes the ground covering syndrome, the textbook, the exposition of information through lectures, the frequent testing for the retention of information, competitive grading, and the like. All of this is compounded to the breaking point by the explosion of knowledge which adds tremendously each year to what must be memorized while there is no way of adding to the time available to the student to accomplish the task. Thought, contemplation, genuine questioning, turning matters over in the mind, problematic situations which require a more leisurely intellectual approach, all these get shunted aside in the mania to cover the ground.

Ironically, knowledge with such a traditional view of education, tends to take on an immutability quite uncharacteristic of knowledge as the scholar conceives of it. To the scholar, knowledge is continually changing in context and content, is held in great tentativeness, is continually questioned and revised and the search for new knowledge is redirected as new questions are posed by the drift and deliberate change in human society. For the scholar, there are no final answers. To treat knowledge as it is treated in many schools is to perpetrate a cruel hoax on students. To gain merely memoritor ends, we rudely interrupt

the search for truth which is the hallmark of scholarship. It is no wonder that scholars frequently express horror at the textbook versions of knowledge which we insist children learn under penalty of grades and failure in school or the implied threat of failure in life.

For many children, our mania for ground covering breeds only an acceptance of failure, for others a sense of irrelevancy, for those who see through the charade, skepticism and loss of hope in the viability of American democratic institutions may result. We can ill afford any of these results.

We must take a fresh look at what we conceive of as knowledge and as the proper content of education. Such a look will recognize that knowledge is really a process as well as a product, and that to separate the two in use or in learning is to destroy the function of knowledge. Knowledge depends on an attitude of mind characterized more by seeking than by certainty. It depends on the ability and willingness to ground one's assertions on evidence, to approach learning in what Bruner refers to as the "hypothetical" as opposed to the "expository" mood. This is the component of knowledge which gets short-changed under ground covering

procedures. Our responses to the explosion of knowledge should be to slacken the memoritor pace, to ask more fundamental questions, to utilize rather than to master data, to seek a more problem-oriented context into which to fit educational effort.

The perpetration of scholastic unreality upon our children also arises out of the teacher's fear of reprisal from various vocal minorities in our society who find the status quo to their liking. To such groups, the consideration of problems or controversial questions are branded as subversive or unAmerican. In a most unAmerican way, these groups insist on obedience to their particular set of beliefs which they equate with the American way. The extent to which teachers knuckle under to such pressure is of course unknown but it is obviously substantial. The small number of cases that come to light when some teacher contests his right to academic freedom are in no way representative of the total. On the basis of studies made by Nelson and Roberts, Lunstrum, Jennings and others, it is clear that extreme right wing organizations, powerful pressure groups, and fanatics of all kinds do powerfully shape the school curriculum to suit their narrow biases. Teachers, particularly the most

able ones, continually work in an atmosphere of fear of unreasonable and frequently ungrounded attack.

What then must be done to bring a greater sense of reality and greater substance to the content of civic education? We must unfalteringly accept an activist philosophy of human development and of education consistent with the democratic philosophy which embraces both mindful conformity and mindful non-conformity. Nothing short of this is consistent with the potentialities of a rapidly changing scientific-technological age, the exact unfolding of which is beyond prediction. It is time that American education outgrows its babysitting, propagandistic, loco parentis role, that it abandon its pretense to be the guardian of all wisdom, that it be more willing to share its problems and perplexities with youth and devote itself exclusively to the cultivation of moral sensibility and the rigors of intellectual honesty, the only role worthy of the name education. This "overhauling" should insure that civic education study, in depth, the really important questions confronting society: poverty, pollution, crime, war, justice, revolution. Teachers must insist on the right to study such questions if democracy is to survive.

May I now turn to my second claim, which is, that the school as a system and its faculty as individuals within the system, must provide a model of mindful activism if it is the expectation that this kind of social behavior is to be assumed by students. Democratic ways of behaving can hardly be learned in an arbitrary or authoritarian school climate. Mindful activism will hardly follow from the example of teachers who demonstrate no confidence in intellectuality or who, through either slothfulness or fear, disengage themselves from public affairs, choosing not to become involved. That the young emulate those whom they find most credible is well attested to by studies in education and psychology. The credibility of schools and school people as models for youthful emulation is seriously compromised by the evident hypocrisy in our schools between word and deed. Exhortation to think and to be one's own man are hardly credible in a system which puts so many restrictions on thinking and in which one may be actually punished for showing independence of thought. Mindful activism is hardly credible when learned about from timorous or pacifistic teachers. Schools are hardly credible where preoccupation with the trivial has driven the really important questions out of the

realm of education or where living strictly by the rule is given more importance than questioning the validity of the rule. Schools lack credibility where arbitrary and authoritarian administrative practices charade as democracy. Students in such schools are forced to turn their emulation to more convincing and more credible models outside the school or from among their own peers.

To what extent do schools provide a climate for the development of student capacity for mindful activism? To what extent do teachers provide models worthy of emulation in this respect? On both counts, I must be very critical of American education.

In the words of one analyst, schools are concerned more with maintaining authority and exacting obedience than with building self-esteem and individuality.¹ Numerous studies, including those by Stouffer,² and by Hess and Forney³ merely confirm what is well known that schools evaluate the behavior of students mainly on the basis of respect for authority

¹Friedenberg, Edgar Z., *The Vanishing Adolescent*, 70-174.

²Stouffer, George A. W., "Behavior Problems of Children as Viewed by Teachers and Mental Hygienists."

³Hess, Robert D. and Forney, Judith V., "The Development of Basic Attitudes and Values Toward Government and Citizenship During the Elementary School Years."

and orderly behavior including conformity to school regulations, however arbitrary these may be, and at the same time tend to disregard or depreciate active democratic participation. Students soon learn to hunt for the right signals and to give the teacher the response wanted sometimes at the cost of considerable loss in self-esteem and individuality.

Why are schools so oppressive of independent thinking and democratic participation on the part of students? It is because school people take quite seriously their function to prepare children for adult roles by giving them the values, knowledges, and skills believed by adults to be desirable. The legal basis of the school accents this paternalistic relationship. Students are required by law to attend school. Since children are presumed to be innocent of their adult needs, adults prescribe what shall be taught and how the school will be operated. While in school, students are subject to the authority of school officials, and have very little to say about what and how they are to be taught.

School administrators tend to see the school as an agency of the government and of the community to which they are answerable in terms of the efficiency with which prescribed values, knowledge and skills are

transmitted to children. Administrators tend to become preoccupied with matters of efficiency and control. Careful observers of American educational institutions are struck by the too apparent parallels between such institutions and the lock step of military establishment. The movement of students through the system is carefully controlled at almost every point, the enforcers being grades and the threatened loss of extra curricular privileges. Student government, notoriously farcical, is used primarily to dissipate hostility to arbitrary controls rather than to permit any real participation in control. Without delving in depth into the subject, may I suggest that students are the last important group in America from whom are withheld their basic civic rights. The privacy of students may be invaded by school authorities at will. Students may be convicted of violating the most arbitrary of school rules without even a semblance of due process. It is no wonder in America today that thousands upon thousands of students, including many of the most intelligent, are in open or silent revolt against the system which, despite the best of intentions, is intolerably oppressive and almost completely destructive of the ends of mindful activism. In many schools,

the revolt is so widespread that schools are literally in a state of seige and teachers are in embarrassed route.

Let us turn our searchlight on the teachers. Do teachers provide positive models of mindful activism? While teachers may rule the school with an iron hand, they are notoriously placid and uninspiring citizens. Teachers tend to avoid the public eye, are seldom community leaders, and are infrequently consulted on public affairs. The public image of the teacher is one of innane neutrality. He is seen as a steward of the public will, not an actor in the public arena. He carries nowhere near the prestige that is ascribed to lawyers, or physicians, or even to ministers, many of whom of late have been constant prodders of public opinion. Militancy on the part of teachers has arisen of late, but has been concerned primarily with matters of wages and working conditions, ostensibly with the welfare of children in mind, and has not been concerned appreciably with such fundamental questions as the right of academic freedom for both teachers and students. Most teachers retreat to the safety of teaching trivia, avoiding controversial issues. A few, who are bold enough to run the risk involved in dealing with controversy,

are in continual fear of public reprisal, unprotected by their fellow teachers who would prefer not to get involved. With the exception of the universities, teacher unity on matters of academic freedom has been, for the most part, abortive. National associations of teachers, below the college level, have been notoriously ineffective in protecting the right of academic freedom for their members.

I may sound, at this point, as if I am castigating school people individually and in general for hypocrisy, cupidity, egregiousness, and shortsightedness as well as a host of other educational crimes. Not at all. School people are generally hardworking, conscientious people, trying mightily against increasingly overwhelming odds to merit the confidence which we have placed in them to socialize our children in the ways of their elders. If anything, school people suffer from overacting the very role we have historically expected them to fulfill. The trouble lies in a conception of education which, if it was ever completely valid, no longer fits our circumstances. At a time when the moral structure of our society is being questioned at its foundations, when a search for a new and better morality is so obviously the most important

order of business for our society, we treat children as if no questions were being raised, as if there was indeed some ancient and unquestioned morality which it is our unbounded duty to transmit, untarnished, to youth. All of us are caught up in this hypocrisy, parents, the public, even the president of the United States as well as teachers. We are perpetrating on youth, in high good faith, a hoax which youth can readily see is just that. The low credibility of schools and school people is the inevitable result.

All of this does not mean that our society is in peril of disintegration. It may indeed mean that we are regrouping on stronger grounds than existed before. There are no problems confronting us today that will not submit to the application of intelligence and pragmatic good will. Although the future is indeed uncertain, although the answers to our problems are not presently crystal clear, the processes by which problems may be resolved are within our grasp. These processes must be incorporated into the very content of our scholastic studies so that frank, socially sensitive, and intellectually honest confrontations with our problems may be achieved. With this goal in view, schools should take on a very different role

than they have occupied in the past. The role of the school becomes more that of deliberated criticism and reconstruction of society than that of transmission. With such a role, an honest sense of history is still of great importance.

Accepting such a changed philosophy of education will necessitate drastic modification of the control of education. Authoritarian patterns of school control which vest all power in the adult school official will necessarily be modified to allow effective participation by students. I would predict that once this is done honestly the problem of student revolt will melt away.

Secondly, teachers and students must be free to inquire, discuss openly, follow any lead, pursue any problem wherever this pursuit may take them. The public must be made to understand the absolute necessity of this position if education is to be of any value in a period of moral and political transition and change.

Teachers should organize, if need be, to protect their academic freedom. Each individual teacher must accept his responsibility to protect fellow teachers in the exercise of academic freedom. Furthermore,

students must be helped to see that academic freedom is equally meaningful and equally vital to teachers, students, and citizens. Associations such as NCSS must make their very highest priority the protection of the rights of students and teachers to pursue an education free of restraint or interference from any special interest. Teachers and students also need to be encouraged to exercise their rights to participate normally and to be leaders in the public arena. With these imperatives in mind, a long overdue and absolutely necessary new day will come in American civic education.