

The School in the Political Socialization of Children and Youth

BYRON G. MASSIALAS *

Interview

Q.: Do you think you can trust the government?

A.: Yes, I do.

Q.: Why?

A.: Well, because like if people elected them or something, that means most people think they can trust them, so that's why they're elected.

(Fifth-grade girl, rural school)

Q.: Do you think you can trust the government?

A.: Never.

Q.: Why?

A.: Because . . . they . . . take more than half the money from my mother and more than half the money from my father. Now all they do is just keep it, they haven't cleaned up Detroit, they just send people to the moon and make jails and everything.

Q.: Do they care about you and your family?

A.: They don't care about nobody, just about the moon.

(Sixth-grade boy, inner city)

THERE are at least four ways in which the school may relate to the political system: (a) through the political socialization of children and youth; (b) through the selection, recruitment, and training of political leaders; (c) through politically integrating a community or society; and (d) through the organization of special interest groups which attempt to influence political decisions. In this article we concentrate only on the first function of the school.¹

In its role as an agent of political socialization, the school, implicitly or explicitly, may contribute to the child's development of basic political orientations toward the system. If the political orientations of the citizens are congenial to the system, the system may continue its existence for some period of time. If the orientations imparted by the school or other social agencies are not supportive of the system, the system may collapse or drastically change. Systems which

¹ The political socialization as well as the other functions of the school are developed in: Byron G. Massialas, *Education and the Political System*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1969.

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provide open mechanisms for rapid change and are responsive to the demands of their citizens appear, in historical perspective, to have more chances for political survival and continuity than those systems which have not institutionalized means of change.

Recent events in the United States and abroad involving students make the study of the role of the school in the education of citizens extremely important. There are two fundamental questions that can be asked in this respect: (a) Is there any evidence to indicate that the school—the curriculum, the teachers, the textbooks, the classroom milieu, the extracurricular activities—relates to how children and youth feel toward their political environment; and (b) If there is a role that the school actually performs in this area, is it the right role or should it be changed? The first question is an “is” question; the second is an “ought” question. I shall attempt to deal briefly with both of them.

Results of Political Socialization

Political socialization is generally the process of acquiring and changing the culture of one's own political environment. Political socialization is measured through the use of indexes, the most important of which are political efficacy, political trust, citizen duty, expectation for political participation, and political knowledge.

Political efficacy is a person's ability to understand his government and to feel competent in changing it. The efficacious person feels he has the power to influence political decisions. *Political trust* refers to the feeling of confidence (or lack of it) one develops toward the government and its officials. One may score high on the index of political trust if one views the government as caring about the personal lives of the citizens. Conversely, one may score low on political trust if one thinks the government officials (for example, the President or members of the Congress) do not care about and do not listen to the wishes of the people. *Citizen duty* is the sense of obligation one feels toward his government, usually expressed through voting in an election. *Political participation* refers to

either expected or actual involvement in political activity such as in discussions or political rallies and meetings. *Political knowledge* refers to the cognitive understanding that one has of the operation of the political system (both its structure and process) and to the capacity that one has to evaluate critically the system's effectiveness. How does the school relate to political outcomes?

Political Role of the School

Studies conducted in the United States and abroad generally support the notion that the more education a person has the more efficacious he becomes. For example, if one has a college education one is more likely to have a higher sense of political efficacy than one who has no education at all. A question asking whether or not one can do something about a local regulation that one considers unjust or unfair elicited an affirmative response from 60 percent of those who had only a primary school education or less. The same question elicited an affirmative response from 82 percent of those with some secondary education and 95 percent of those with some college education.²

With education there seems to be considerable change in how people define the good citizen. Those with eight years of education or less generally use nonpolitical criteria (for example, honest and trustworthy, good worker, good neighbor) to describe the good citizen. In contrast, those with more than 12 years of formal education tend to describe the good citizen in terms of participatory criteria (for example, being informed about public affairs, taking an active part in national politics, etc.).³

Quantity of education is easier to measure than quality, yet these criteria provide gross measures. The few studies available need to be viewed with caution since they offer suggestive rather than definitive findings.

² Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1965. p. 162.

³ George Levenson. “The Content of Private Political Obligations.” Forthcoming in *Education and the Political World of Youth*, to be published by Prentice-Hall, Inc., and edited by B. G. Massialas.

The Elementary School

The major political function of the elementary school is to foster compliance with governmental rules and authority. The formal curriculum and instructional programs generally underemphasize the children's right to participate in political decisions and overemphasize compliance with the government and uncritical loyalty toward the system. Political parties and partisanship do not receive much attention from the point of view of either the curriculum or the teachers responsible for it.⁴

Suburban vs. Inner City Schools

It appears, however, that schools differ in their influence on the political socialization of children. Children attending suburban elementary schools tend to have a higher sense of political trust than children attending inner city schools. To the question, "Do you think people in the government listen to what the people like you, your family, and neighbors want the government to do?" 67 percent of the suburban school children in the sample responded in the affirmative, as compared to only 47 percent of the inner city school children.

Also, children from the inner city schools felt much less efficacious than their rural or suburban counterparts in being able to influence the government. To the statement, "People like me and my family can change what happens in the government," 69 percent of the children in the inner city school responded negatively, but only 53 percent of the rural and 49 percent of the suburban schools responded in the same manner.⁵ It appears that various factors within and outside the school make the inner city child perceive his role in the political system in a different light than the suburban or the rural school child.

⁴ Robert D. Hess and Judith V. Torney. *The Development of Political Attitudes in Children*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967.

⁵ Allen D. Glenn. "Elementary School Children's Feelings of Political Trust, Political Efficacy, and Political Change." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1970.



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It is interesting to note that, as children advance through the elementary grades, they become more politically efficacious but their feeling of political trust decreases. This phenomenon is more observable with children in suburban schools than with other children. It appears that, in addition to general developmental factors among children, the school curriculum may contribute to the sense of political efficacy and trust of children. The Hess and Torney research is suggestive of the connection between the two sets of factors, but the available research does not establish explicit relations.

The impact of the formal curriculum, in general, and that of the textbooks, in particular, may be inferred by looking at children's notions of how one goes about changing the government. Overall, children, especially those in the suburban school, favor traditional or textbook ways of changing the government. For example, 58 percent of children in the suburban school and 33 percent of children in the inner city school

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thought that writing a letter to the President was the best way to change the government. Not surprisingly, given the nature of the traditional curriculum of the school, only a very small percentage of children in the suburban and inner city schools (11 percent and 8 percent, respectively) advocated such nontraditional ways of changing the government as taking part in a demonstration or protest.⁶ The relation between how children feel about ways of political change and what the most popular civics texts advocate is certainly not coincidental.

The Secondary School

School people have for years claimed that formal citizenship education programs in the high school (for example, civics, U.S. history, government, and Problems of American Democracy) contribute to the development of the good citizen. The few studies available in the field generally contradict this claim—they find very little or no relationship between civics education and the five political socialization measures to which we pointed earlier.⁷ More traditional social studies or civics courses do not produce better results.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Kenneth P. Langton and M. Kent Jennings. "Political Socialization and the High School Civics Curriculum in the United States." *American Political Science Review* 62: 852-67; September 1968; Lee H. Ehman. "An Analysis of the Relationships of Selected Educational Variables with the Political Socialization of High School Students." *American Educational Research Journal* 6: 559-80; November 1969.

What appears to be more important than the number of courses offered, however, is whether or not controversial issues are introduced and whether or not these issues are discussed in a classroom climate which is conducive to critical inquiry. When issues are analyzed objectively and when students are given the opportunity to generate and defend their own ideas about social events, they measure relatively high on all important political socialization measures. This observation applies to both black and white students.

Unfortunately, the available evidence indicates that most classrooms and the textbooks used in them in the United States and abroad are not conducive to inquiry into social and political issues. That most textbooks and materials foster apathy toward and an uncritical compliance with the system is well documented in the literature.⁸ We also find that the majority of secondary school teachers (52.5 percent) spent between 0-10 percent of their teaching time discussing social issues. Only 3 percent of the teachers give to social issues between 50-75 percent of their instructional time. Also, teachers in the sample (comprised mainly of teachers of biology, English, and social studies), although often willing, were not adequately equipped to deal with issues in the spirit of inquiry. For example, on a simple task of separating fact from opinion, 44 percent of

⁸ C. Benjamin Cox and Byron G. Massialas, editors. *Social Studies in the United States: A Critical Appraisal*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967.

the teachers indicated that the following statement is fact or mostly fact: "The American form of government may not be perfect but it is the best type of government yet devised by man."⁹ Teachers who had a high belief in traditional sociopolitical values were strongly inclined to identify this opinion statement as fact. In the total sample we find a good portion of teachers to have quite traditional attitudes. About one-third of the teachers scored very high on the scale measuring belief in traditional sociopolitical values (BTSV). Some of the statements upon which the BTSV scale was based were: "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn"; "The main purpose of social studies courses is to teach students to be good and loyal citizens."¹⁰

Role of the School Needs Drastic Change

The evidence suggests that the school has not performed a leadership role in the political process. In the politicalization of children and youth, the school has maintained an attitude of passivity and compliance. At no time did the school try to instill

⁹ Byron G. Massialas, Nancy Sprague, and Jo Ann Sweeney. *Structure and Process of Inquiry into Social Issues in Secondary Schools*. Volume I. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1970. (Research performed pursuant to U.S. Office of Education Contract OEC 3-7-061678-2942.)

¹⁰ The details of the BTSV scale are given in *ibid.* Also available in the report is the *Michigan Social Issues Cognitive Category System*, an observation instrument designed to measure the extent to which the teacher utilizes inquiry skills in dealing with social issues and the extent of student involvement in classroom discussion.

an activist orientation—an orientation which would prompt youth to involve itself directly in political change.

Given the prevailing social conditions in the world, the school, in order to be functional, needs to change its general direction in the political socialization of youth. Specifically, the school needs to address itself to the following:

1. Introduce new programs in civics which would present a realistic picture of the political system and instruct youth how to participate effectively in the political process. The old textbook notions of change and participation (for example, "writing a letter to one's own representative") must give way to new activist and direct confrontation processes which have proven to be, in many cases, quite effective.

2. Build into the entire curriculum a social issues component. Pressing social issues, such as the use of drugs, the war, and unequal distribution of income, should be discussed in all classes—in literature, in mathematics, in home economics, in physical education.

3. The spirit and the process of inquiry should prevail in all classrooms. Classroom instruction should assume that the best way to learn is through the examination of student-initiated, not teacher-initiated ideas. As the evidence indicates, participation in generating and testing ideas about social issues contributes to increased political efficacy and an understanding of the political world.

4. The school should provide a laboratory for decision making for both students and teachers. The traditional student councils and faculty meetings do not provide for participatory behavior. In these meetings only trivial matters are discussed. The concept of participatory democracy needs to be introduced and actively applied. □

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