

# IS INDOCTRINATION A NECESSARY EVIL OF EDUCATION?

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The debate over indoctrination covers well worn ground in the philosophy of education. Some have suggested the entire issue amounts to a pseudo-argument since there are no available mechanisms to distinguish between indoctrinated beliefs and authentically formed ones.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective all of our ideas and beliefs are the result of indoctrination in the form of intellectual manipulation or coercion. Others have suggested that indoctrination is both negative in its effect by creating intellectually passive students and entirely avoidable in education.<sup>2</sup> In this brief essay, I suggest an honest appraisal of teaching reveals that, at least on occasion, most teachers engage in some form of intentional or unintentional indoctrination. The more critical element, then, involves understanding the potential impact of indoctrination on students and society, and developing pedagogical practices that effectively counter these threats.

Indoctrination occurs in a variety of fashions. For example, a teacher might inappropriately emphasize one political position over another (consciously or otherwise), leave out relevant evidence that supports a perspective other than her own, or occasionally fail to raise questions about theories, ideas or positions that are in fact worth questioning. Even the selection of particular readings in exclusion to others may signal the presence of indoctrination. Perhaps the most dominant form of indoctrination, sometimes referred to as osmotic indoctrination,<sup>3</sup> involves presenting prevailing structural conditions to students as a social “reality” that is fixed and unchangeable. The corresponding message is that social construction lies beyond the decision making force of students as future citizens and the latter’s role is reduced to social compliance. Teachers at all levels concerned with indoctrination ought to be on guard against all of these practices and do their conscious best to avoid manipulating students toward certain viewpoints.

When practiced to the extreme, the potentially disastrous consequences of indoctrination are readily apparent. The manipulation of public opinion via indoctrination played a critical role in Nazi Germany by creating a blind and woefully misguided population that supported Hitler’s rise to power. The sophisticated Nazi propaganda machine realized that indoctrination masquerading as education could create a closed and manipulated mind, and consequently, produce committed followers of Nazism. Every effort was made to ensure that students were not exposed to any uncensored ideas. The infamous Hitler Youth Movement was created to organize post-school activities that prevented student exposure to alternative perspectives circulating beyond the purview of state school walls.

Terrorism, whether practised in the name of Islam, Irish Catholicism, or any other religious or nonreligious political doctrine, is not confined to maniacal suicidal explosions or the mass infliction of senseless murders. The seeds of terrorism are typically sown with indoctrination and the intolerance of, and contempt for, other viewpoints it breeds. For example, religious indoctrination does far more than lead to the explosion of planes and buildings; it paralyzes human reason, logic and emotions. I am perpetually struck by the willingness of otherwise rational individuals to abandon all epistemic conventions to protect indoctrinated religious beliefs. When beliefs are not the product of reason and evidence, they obviously cannot be defeated by reason and evidence.

While violence and indoctrination are distinct problems, they frequently overlap, such as when youth are deceived or frightened into sexual submission by religious opportunists and predators. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins provocatively argues that religious indoctrination is a blatant form of child abuse, and more damaging than the actual sexual abuse committed by some members of the clergy.<sup>4</sup> Physical molestation is obviously a despicable act, but in Dawkin's view, the routine abuse of children's minds is more appalling since the scale of abuse is far more extensive. The widely reported sexual abuse is routinely preceded by intellectual deception and emotional manipulation in an indoctrinatory religious power play.

Although educators are unlikely to prevent all forms of indoctrination (many students will be indoctrinated even before arriving at school), they can still assist and encourage students to evaluate the authenticity of their beliefs. Indeed, this is what a quality education minimally ought to achieve. A well-educated student should leave a liberal education program with a level of intellectual humility that recognizes many personally held beliefs, values and ideological commitments may eventually prove to be misguided. Dogma is the death of education and personal growth.

The mitigation of indoctrination obviously requires instilling particular intellectual virtues that generate an open rather than a closed mind in students. Personality traits such as openness to the ideas of others, willingness to exchange ideas, a lively sense of one's own fallibility (a quality Hitler was obviously lacking), and resisting the excitement and rashness of overly enthusiastic commitment to beliefs (religious and otherwise) are all personal qualities that can be fostered in classrooms. Perhaps the most effective method students might employ is examining the causal history of personal belief formation in a search for any undue external interference. By reflecting on the development of their belief systems and identifying any coercive, one-sided or manipulative instruction, students may begin to name the indoctrinatory forces that shaped some of their ideas. When potential indoctrination is identified in belief formation, then further investigation of that belief is warranted. In the final analysis this may not change student beliefs (of course that is not necessarily the purpose), but it should move them toward greater degrees of authenticity, and away from indoctrinated dogma and its potentially deleterious consequences.

Although teachers can never hope to eliminate indoctrination from education or probably even their own classrooms, they can provide students with the intellectual equipment to identify inappropriate manipulation during belief formation. Teachers may also foster in students the character qualities that encourage self-questioning and openness to positions other than their own. We cannot realistically eliminate indoctrination in its various forms completely but we can adopt pedagogical approaches that provoke student analysis of personal dogmatic and misguided points of view that promote hatred, intolerance, violence and political oppression in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

### **Endnotes**

1. See, for example, Baudrillard, J. 1989. *Selected Writings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
2. See, for example, Peters, R.S. 1973. *The Philosophy of Education*. London, UK: Oxford University Press.
3. See, for example, Raywid, M.A. 1984. Perspectives on the struggle against indoctrination, *Educational Forum* 48 (2): 136-154.
4. Dawkins, R. 2006. *Religion's Real Child Abuse*. Retrieved September 25, 2010 from <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/118>