

## POLITICS IN THE CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** The main purpose of this paper is to point out the tendencies of increasing politicization of education, especially primary and secondary. The presence of politics in the classroom can be recognized: a) through various political contents in teaching that are prescribed in the official curriculum for primary and secondary schools and they are a derivative of the ruling value system and political culture of the given society; b) in the interactions and communication between students and teachers, between students, in extracurricular activities and the school environment, which all together constitute the “hidden curriculum”; and c) through student participation in school decision-making related to teaching and extracurricular activities. In the research for the purposes of this paper, a functionalist theoretical methodological approach was applied, and the basic methods were qualitative content analysis and descriptive-analytical method. These methods were applied in the analysis of contemporary and relevant literature in the field of sociological, political and pedagogical sciences, as well as the results of empirical research related to children's participation in school. The results of the research carried out in this paper indicate that in the official curriculum, political education is visible in the educational goals, political content in different subjects and teaching units, as well as in the methodical instructions to teachers for teaching. These factors of political education have their own ideological and political consistency and spill over into textbooks and other teaching aids so that they form an integral part of the educational process and socialization of children. In parallel with the official curriculum, the “hidden curriculum” also functions in the school. Among the numerous factors of the hidden curriculum, the *relationship of the children with the teacher*, as one of the first authorities outside the family, and then with the subject teachers, stands out in particular. *social climate*, which refers to the atmosphere in the classroom among peer groups, which favors the consolidation or reshaping of political attitudes and patterns of behavior; and *learning culture*, which refers to the influence of the school environment on political orientations and attitudes at school. Children's participation in school is expressed mainly as participation in the decision-making process on issues of their interest. This paper points to the results of two empirical studies on children's participation. The first was implemented in Serbia in 2009, in Belgrade elementary schools on student leadership; and the second in Croatia during 2017, in primary and secondary schools on the overall participation of children in schools. In the first survey, the results indicate the value system on which children are brought up and the leadership in the department, which largely has the characteristics of political leadership. In the second research, the results show that children's participation is achieved mostly in extracurricular activities and that students consider participation in decision-making important, as well as that their level of influence on decisions about changes in the school is low, because their suggestions are often ignored. Many teachers and professional associates at the school, as shown by the research results, pointed out that a higher level of children's participation means more obligations for them, which most do not want, and that is why children's participation in decision-making is neglected. In schools, where adults recognize the importance and meaning of children's participation, their participation is more effective and changes are encouraged in school life. From these brief considerations, it is evident that the classroom is not only a room where classes are held, but also the scene of invisible but real influences that also have a political connotation.

**Keywords:** Political Education, Classroom, School, Students.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Classroom politics is a reality of the modern education system. The classroom is not only a place where a certain culture is transmitted and knowledge about nature, society, man and his opinion is acquired, but also a place for various political phenomena and processes. Politics permeates many teaching contents, it is present in various interactions at school, social climate, learning culture and student participation in school decision-making. That is why the classroom in the literature is also referred to as (*The Political Classroom*), as Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy do. According to these authors, “the political classroom” helps students develop their ability to think about political issues, and in it, teachers, in addition to teaching, involve students in discussions on various issues, from what rules the class should adopt to current and controversial political issues. This is how children learn to think

politically and engage in politics (Hess & McAvoy, 2014). The main goal of this work is to point out the tendencies of the increasing politicization of education, without the intention of disputing or glorifying such tendencies. That is why this paper deals with the synthesis of previous knowledge about the political dimensions of education in primary and secondary schools, in their classrooms, which excludes external political influences on the education system from the analysis. Accordingly, in this research, a functionalist theoretical methodological approach was applied, and the basic methods were qualitative content analysis and descriptive-analytical method. These methods were applied in the analysis of relevant literature and the results of some empirical research related to children's participation in school. Based on the knowledge so far, three sectors can be conditionally distinguished in which the presence of politics in the classroom can be recognized: a) through various political contents in the official curriculum for primary and secondary schools, because they are a derivative of the ruling value system and political culture of the given society; b) in the interactions and communication between students and teachers, between students, in extracurricular activities and the school environment, which all together constitute the “hidden curriculum”; and c) through children's participation in school related to teaching and extracurricular activities.

## 2. POLITICAL EDUCATION THROUGH THE OFFICIAL CURRICULUM

Political education is an organized part of upbringing and political socialization through which the development of political culture is influenced in political communities, in accordance with the ruling system of social values, especially ideological and political ones. Many authors point out that political education has a very important effect on political cohesion in society and the strength of political loyalty towards the state, the nation, and even the family. That is why political education is extremely important for the stability of any society (Bazić, 2010). On the other hand, it should be pointed out that political education is a term with often negative connotations, which in public discourse causes various prejudices and even paranoid thoughts, such as those that politics should be kept away from education (Nilgun, et al., 2015).

In the official curriculum, which represents the value system of a certain society and its political culture, political education is contained in educational goals, different thematic units in teaching subjects, as well as methodical instructions to teachers for teaching. Education and upbringing of people for life in a political community has its own long tradition, dating back to ancient times. By establishing political science as a separate scientific discipline within the framework of social sciences at universities, first in the USA at the end of the 19th century, political education is institutionalized and introduced into the process of formal education. Following the same model, it was gradually introduced in other countries in order for broad sections of the population to acquire democratic competences and related skills or knowledge (Weinberg, 2020). This contributed to the democratization of these societies so that political education and political institutions developed in them simultaneously and interdependently, which also contributed to the development of a corresponding political culture. At the end of the 20th century, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which entered the transition process, soon faced the problem of the lack of a democratic political culture, and this required another ideological concept of political education. That is why they were forced to carry out educational reforms and introduce new political contents into their educational system, which are in the function of education and upbringing for life in a society organized in accordance with neoliberal development strategies (Trifunović, 2013). However, these reforms did not raise the quality of education, just as this effect was not achieved in developing countries either (Hickey & Hossain, 2019). At the same time as these processes, the Council of Europe and other international organizations launched various projects in order to create a new political culture based on the ideological principles of liberal democracy as quickly and efficiently as possible in post-communist countries. In this context, the *Civic Education* (Aprcović, 2016; Osmanlić, 2017; Moxon & Escamilla, 2020) and *Global Education* (Da Silva, 2010; Bazić & Sekulić, 2021) projects are particularly important. In institutional education, there are different models of political education, among which four dominate (Šalaj, 2002). In the first model, it is part of the school system, but not directly of the curriculum. It is seen here as an extracurricular activity and it is assumed that certain elements of the school system will be sufficient to encourage the development of a democratic political culture in students and that this will sufficiently prepare them for political life in a democratic society. In the second model, it is an integral part of the school curriculum, but the political contents are placed in several complementary teaching subjects, which are considered appropriate for the political education of students. This model is based on the assessment that political education should not be separated from the entire educational process (Crick & Heater, 2012). Also, in the third model, political education is represented in the school program, but it is an integral part of integrated interdisciplinary education and is realized through one school subject in which certain contents from social sciences are studied. And in the fourth model, political education is an integral part of the curriculum, where it gets a separate place in the form of one or more teaching subjects (Šalaj, 2002). In Serbia, the fourth model of political education is mostly expressed, where political content is placed in one teaching subject (*Civic Education*), but they are also represented in other complementary subjects.

### 3. POLITICAL CONTENTS IN THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

The term “hidden curriculum” originated in the literature on educational environments and is based on the thesis that some experiences from the educational system can positively or negatively shape one's development (Alsubaie, 2015). The hidden curriculum refers to various subtle influences on the student (Bilbao, et al., 2008), as well as many hidden issues that are the result of assumptions and expectations, because they are not formally communicated, established or transmitted within the learning framework (Alsubaie, 2015). Among the numerous factors of the structure of the hidden curriculum in the literature, the following stand out in particular: the relationship with the teacher, and then with the teacher, the social structure of the school, the social climate, the culture of learning and the influence of the peer group. *In the relationship with the teacher*, as one of the first authorities outside the family, the child builds elementary concepts about politics that he acquired in the family, such as: power, rule, management and official authority. The teacher personalizes power structures, sets standards in assessing the social environment and becomes a credible source of political information. The teacher is the undisputed authority in the classroom, he determines the rules and creates a system of values that the child should strive for and that helps him understand the basic elements of political culture (Manheim, 1975 according to Vasović, 2007). A very important component of the hidden curriculum is the social structure of the school. The type of school and the choice of a specific school largely depend on the place of residence and the position of the family in the social structure. Most often, schools gather or group students with similar socio-economic characteristics. In such a situation, children from the same social environment “introduce” to school similar values that they have already acquired in the family and the closest social environment, so that the social composition of the student population potentially ensures their reproduction. The school, as a common agent of education and upbringing, strives to convey the same content to all students and create a common system of values, so that it can be a meeting place of new values and political viewpoints that are different from those of the family (Vasović, 2007). *Social climate*, in its broadest definition, refers to the quality and character of school life (Cohen et al., 2009). It implies cooperative and functional relations among all actors of school life where mutual respect and responsible behavior should prevail. However, the school climate is also characterized by conflicts, as well as very complex relationships between peer groups that influence the “atmosphere in the classroom”, which favors the strengthening or reshaping of political attitudes and patterns of behavior. Peer groups at school are small social systems within which individuals often question their parents' or acquire new attitudes and patterns of behavior. The social climate can contribute to the “modernization” of political attitudes among children from lower classes, greater interest in politics and readiness for political participation (Vasović, 2007). *Learning culture* refers primarily to the influence of the school environment on the learning process and student incentives for expressing a critical approach, developing their interest in various topics, and for student participation in discussion, even when they disagree with the majority. Then, it refers to incentives for students to form their own opinion and create opportunities to defend, negotiate and change it (CoE, 2016). Learning culture includes many politically relevant orientations, such as: passivity or activism, conformity, respect for authority, acceptance of unequal distribution of power, desirable social behavior, etc. Attitudes toward achievement, change, competence, obedience, cooperation, etc., which are formed in the classroom, also have an impact on political attitudes. In recent works on school as a factor of political socialization, school is treated as “preparation for democracy” (Vasović, 2007). In particular, two factors of the learning culture are pointed out: the right to autonomous expression of opinion, which refers to the way authority is exercised in the classroom, and the feeling of identification with the school.

### 4. PARTICIPATION OF CHILDREN IN SCHOOL

Children's participation in school is generally considered as the participation of students in the decision-making process on important issues that are of their interest, which in a wider context can contribute to the development of a “democratic climate”(Mager & Nowak, 2012). Such participation does not always mean independent decision-making by students, but also the possibility of expressing an opinion that will be taken into account when making decisions in the school. The inclusion of students in the decision-making process also depends on their age capabilities, so the ways and levels of their participation are determined accordingly. Children's participation in school was established in primary and secondary schools based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and then implemented in national legislation. At the same time, with the activities of UNESCO and the non-governmental sector, children's participation is supported by various events and publications. One such publication indicates that “all children have the right to participate in various extracurricular and other activities organized at school” (Cerović, 2019, 16). Then, he addresses the students directly: “It is important that you know that you have the right to participate in the work of your school and to express your opinion regarding issues that are important to you. You can do that through the student parliament” (Cerović, 2019, 16). The responsibilities of the student parliament have a political character to a significant extent. However, the participation of children in school is

conditioned by the school climate, which affects the development of information, self-initiative, comprehensive perception and efficiency in understanding and solving problems, accepting changes, assuming responsibility, proper communication, respect for equality and autonomy of students, tolerance, developing partner communication and interaction relationship (Ćirić, 2019, 60). How realistically children participate in decision-making at school and what the political climate is like in their classroom is difficult to reliably find out. There are studies on this that give very interesting results. On this occasion, we point to the results of two empirical studies on children's participation. The first was realized in Serbia in 2009, in Belgrade elementary schools on student leadership. This research was carried out by Slobodan Malušić, pedagogue and director of Elementary School "Đura Daničić" in Belgrade, on a sample of 675 students from fifth to eighth grade from several elementary schools in Belgrade. And the second in Croatia during 2017, in primary and secondary schools on children's participation in schools. This is about the research conducted by Ivana Borić, special pedagogue and professor at the Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation at the University of Zagreb, with her colleagues. 2720 students and 461 teachers and professional associates of primary and secondary schools from Croatia participated in this research.

In the first survey, when asked what kind of leader they want in the class, the students generally answered that the leader should solve problems peacefully, fight for the students' rights, be a good friend and be well-mannered. On the other hand, a leader should not be mangy, aggressive, fight, be a bad student, be selfish, greedy, unfair, disorganized and rude. When asked what qualities their class leader has, the students highlighted positive qualities in most answers; but there are, as they say, leaders who are characterized by negative qualities: that he is rude, irresponsible, quarrels with teachers, fights, pretends to be important, teases girls, is violent and arrogant. And about what the leader of the departmental community should be like, the author of the research, S. Malusic points out rather authoritarian attitudes: that he should be the leader in the class, and not only the one who is a good student, but also obedient and helps the class teacher, because through the leader, the class teacher can easily create a positive atmosphere in the class and it is much easier to solves problems (Andrić, 2009).

The results of the second survey indicate that, as the children stated, their participation is achieved mostly in extracurricular activities and they consider this important because they participate in decision-making, but their suggestions are often ignored. Children express dissatisfaction with the small opportunities for participation in decision-making regarding teaching units and the frequent favoring of individual students. Children's participation is also achieved through the Student Council, which children see as an opportunity to express their proposals, but they believe that this council has a low level of influence on decisions about changes in the school. The reason given is the participation of a small number of students, so the possibility of involving the rest of the class in the work of these councils is negligible. Then, the children believe that the teachers and professional associates at the school do not sufficiently encourage children's participation in school activities and that they have to initiate it independently, while they believe that the adults at the school are focused exclusively on topics related to teaching and evaluation. Children would like to have a greater understanding of their suggestions and support from adults at school. On the other hand, from the answers of the teachers and professional associates at the school, it was shown that many of them do not understand the rights of the child at all. They indicate that children love the sense of importance they feel through participation in decision-making. In schools where teachers and professional associates firmly believe in the importance and meaning of children's participation, Student Councils are active and regular, so they meet continuously and encourage changes in the school. However, in schools where adults are not convinced of the meaning of these councils, such councils do not perform their function (Borić et al., 2019).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In political education and upbringing, schools have an exceptional responsibility. They are in charge of preparing young people for life in a democratic society, and depriving them of political content would be a renunciation of that responsibility. In school, the classroom is the central place. Everything happens in it, including politics in different forms and contents: through teaching materials in the official curriculum, in the "hidden curriculum" and through the participation of children in decision-making at school. In institutional education, for primary and secondary schools, political education is defined through different models, among which the most often expressed is the one where political content is placed in one teaching subject, but they are simultaneously represented in other complementary subjects. In the official curriculum, which represents the ruling value system of a certain society and its political culture, political content is visible in educational goals, different thematic units in teaching subjects and methodical instructions to teachers for teaching. These factors of political education have their own ideological and political consistency and spill over into textbooks and other teaching aids so that they form an integral part of the educational process. Apart from the official curriculum, the "hidden curriculum" also functions in the school. It refers to various subtle influences on the student, as well as many invisible issues that are the result of various relationships and interactions in the school, such as: the relationship with the teacher, and then with the teacher, the

social structure of the school, the social climate, the culture of learning and peer group influence. The participation of children in school is mainly reduced to the participation of students in the decision-making process on issues that are of interest to them. This does not always mean the student's independent decision-making, but also includes the possibility of expressing an opinion that will be taken into account when making decisions in the school. This paper points to the results of two empirical studies on the functioning of children's participation. In the first survey, the results indicate the value system on which children are brought up and the leadership in the department, which largely has the characteristics of political leadership. In the second research, the results show that children's participation is achieved mostly in extracurricular activities and that students consider participation in decision-making important, as well as that their level of influence on decisions about changes in the school is low, because their suggestions are often ignored. From these summarized considerations, it is evident that the classroom is not only a place where teaching is carried out, but also a space where political factors are present and where, at the same time, children's inclination towards active participation in the overall life of society, including its political dimension, can be shaped.

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