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Developing pedagogy for responsible leadership:

Towards a dialogic theory of democratic education

Volume 1 of 2

Submitted by Rupert John Edward Higham, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education, November 2012.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the connections between dialogue, education and democracy. It begins by asking: 'what are the implications of dialogic theory for democratic education'? In doing so it draws on concepts from the work of Arendt, Biesta, Dewey and Wegerif: dialogic space as a productive metaphor for education; an ontology of difference in which meaning emerges through dialogue; and authentic democratic action as 'coming into being' in negotiation with others.

It then asks, 'Can we teach for democracy?' by looking at recent practices of citizenship education in Britain. It argues that genuine democratic education must consider students as already being citizens rather than as citizens-in-training, and must offer them opportunities to express their values in action.

A theory of 'responsible leadership', based on a 'pedagogy of challenge', is proposed as a means to enable students to develop the skills and dispositions needed for democratic participation. Short courses in leadership education for teenagers are identified as sites to test this theory.

Two empirical studies are detailed, which use a longitudinal case-study approach primarily based on student interviews. The first was a two-day school-based course for academically able 13-18 year olds; the second was a five-day outdoor residential course for 16-18 year olds.

Both studies found significant development in students' skills and dispositions for learning, including: openness to others' ideas, confidence, greater self-knowledge and better communication skills. In both cases, students' personal dispositions and insights endured. However, lack of opportunities for democratic action after the courses meant that learned collaborative skills were not strongly embedded; this also meant that 'responsible leadership' was not often demonstrated subsequently. Nonetheless, the studies present strong evidence for the transformative power of a pedagogy of challenge, which demands further research.

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