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ARTICLE

An Analysis of NCATE's Decision to Drop "Social Justice"

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Maybe it wouldn't bother us if we hadn't picked up tiny rotten teeth from our classroom floors in a toothfairyless neighborhood. Maybe it wouldn't seem as offensive if we hadn't watched our pupils gobble down free breakfasts and lunches—for some, their only meals five days a week. Perhaps we could overlook it if we didn't know about our students' losses—a brother killed in a drive-by shooting, a grandmother's grisly death dealt by a crack dealer, house fires that destroyed everything. Maybe it wouldn't incense us if our elementary pupils had had more up-to-date reference materials than 1952 dictionaries and a donated set of *World Books*, if we had had a school library or hot water or some playground equipment. And we probably wouldn't be as disgusted if we hadn't watched our pupils cry and vomit on high-stakes test days when they intuitively knew they couldn't pass a test because of their limited vocabularies and lack of prior knowledge—consequences of poverty and societal neglect (Johnson & Johnson, 2006). But disgusted we are because NCATE did not stand up for the children we recently taught. Why did the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have such difficulty defining "social justice" that it has banished the term from its lexicon?

Accreditation Hearing

On June 6, 2006, NCATE was reviewed for continued federal recognition as an accreditor by the U. S. Department of Education's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). The transcript of the accreditation hearing (2006) includes the following pronouncements by Arthur E. Wise, president of NCATE:

- On behalf of NCATE, I categorically deny the allegation that NCATE has a standard or requirement on, quote, "social justice"—unquote... (p. 243)
- Let me summarize by stating simply this: NCATE has no standard, written or unwritten, requiring, quote, "social justice"—unquote. (p. 246)
- Most of our institutions would not have an explicit "social justice" expectation, quote-unquote. (p. 255)
- ...I have come to learn, painfully over the last year, the term is susceptible to a variety of definitions....more recently the phrase has acquired some new meanings, evidently connected to a radical social agenda. So lest there be any misunderstanding about our intentions in this regard, we have decided to remove this phrase totally from our vocabulary. (p. 255)

We can define social justice without espousing "a radical social agenda." Social justice means that all children get enough to eat so that hunger does not plague them during the school day. It means that all children have adequate medical and dental care so they do not have to attend school in pain or poor health. Social justice means that children can go to bed at night and not worry about drug dealers and stray bullets. It means that pupils' schools are free from rats, cockroaches, and other vermin. Social justice means that teachers in low-income schools have the materials they need to teach. It means that when economically poor minority children recite "with liberty and justice for all" every school morning, the promise holds true. We suspect that even the most politically conservative citizens of this country would not look at a small, hungry, sick child and believe that meeting that child's basic needs would indicate "a radical social agenda." Why did NCATE sell our most needy pupils down the river by not affirming a commitment to them? "Lest" there be any misunderstanding, Arthur E. Wise, president of NCATE, revealed the organization's apparent greater concern for self-survival than for the social injustice that permeates the lives of so many public school children.

Social Justice Programs in Academia

Most teacher educators see the need for a continuous quest for social justice in American public education because social justice is the bedrock of our beliefs, values, and practices. In his reflection on the future of college and university-based teacher education, Ken Zeichner (2006) wrote, “The goal of greater social justice is a fundamental part of the work of teacher education in democratic societies and we should never compromise on the opportunity to make progress toward its realization” (p. 339).

Legal education recognizes the essentiality of social justice in the American system. Boston College, for example, created a dual degree in law and education to reflect that institution’s commitment to social justice issues. Medical schools (e.g., West Virginia University, Georgetown University), nursing schools (e.g., University of Washington, University of Mississippi), engineering schools (e.g., Binghamton University), and Schools of Social Work (e.g., University of Missouri-Columbia) have developed mission statements that incorporate the need for social justice as a part of our nation’s well-being.

Centers for social justice have been developed at institutions of higher education such as Seton Hall, Santa Clara, and Loyola University of Chicago. Academic majors in social justice can be earned at a number of schools, including Roosevelt University, Brandeis University, and West Virginia University. Social justice minors are offered at Northeastern Illinois University, the University of Minnesota, and others. On the campus of the University of Washington-Seattle, students in the College of Education have formed an Educators for Social Justice organization.

What message does NCATE’s willingness to erase “social justice” from its vocabulary send to the numerous NCATE-accredited institutions that include “social justice” in their mission statements or conceptual frameworks? These NCATE-accredited institutions include the University of Central Florida, University of Alaska-Fairbanks, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Hofstra University, Western New Mexico University, Seattle Pacific University, University of Louisville, University of Alabama, Indiana University at Kokomo, University of Nebraska-Kearney, Northern Illinois University, Gallaudet University, University of Wyoming, Sonoma State University, the University of Massachusetts-Boston, and many others.

In a message that appeared on the NCATE Web site (2006) shortly after the NACIQI hearing in June, 2006, Arthur Wise wrote:

Critics incorrectly alleged that NCATE has a “social justice” requirement. It does not...NCATE expects institutions to ensure that candidates “demonstrate dispositions that value fairness and learning by all students.” In addition to these common sense expectations, institutions may develop additional dispositions that fit their mission. (pp. 1-2)

It will be of interest to see which institutions under consideration for NCATE accreditation or reaccreditation after June, 2006, publicly will champion a commitment to social justice. We suspect that some will not because of the fear of potential loss of accreditation.

Opposition to NCATE’s Reauthorization

Toward the end of the NACIQI hearing, in response to comments by Anne Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni [one of the organizations that opposed NCATE’s reauthorization], Arthur Wise repeated his earlier statement:

I will be extremely brief. NCATE has no standard, written or unwritten, requiring, quote, “social

justice”—unquote. Lest there be any doubt that this example in a glossary be interpreted by anyone as a requirement, the NCATE board charged with monitoring and updating the standards has drafted a new definition of professional dispositions which omits this particular example. (p. 291)

Two other groups, the National Association of Scholars (NAS) and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) presented testimony at the NACIQI hearing. All three organizations' statements were transmitted to NCATE prior to the hearing, in keeping with NACIQI's policy of transparency. Arthur Wise and his NCATE staff, therefore, knew in advance what they would be facing at the June 6, 2006, hearing, and they apparently made the decision that social justice was a small sacrifice for the continued existence of NCATE.

FIRE is an organization that was founded in 1998 by Alan Charles Kors and Harvey A. Silvergate, authors of *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses*. Background information on FIRE (2006a) states, "The mission of FIRE is to defend and sustain individual rights at America's increasingly repressive and partisan colleges and universities" (p. 1). FIRE's opposition to the reapproval of NCATE's accreditation status is because of NCATE's promotion of "diversity" and "social justice," which FIRE considers "politically charged terminology" (p. 1). FIRE (2006b) observed, "NCATE and our nation's education schools are improperly attempting to dictate the values and ideals that teachers must possess in order to educate students" (p. 5).

The National Association of Scholars (2006) labels itself "America's foremost higher education reform group" (p. 1). Members of the NAS board of directors include Chester E. Finn, Jr., senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and John Silber, former president of Boston University. The NAS opposition to NCATE's continued existence as an accreditor notes:

The NAS has had a long-standing concern with the mischief inherent in the use of as ideologically fraught a term as "social justice" in the assessment of students in teacher-training programs. The concept is so variable in meaning as necessarily to subject students to the ideological caprices of instructors and programs. (p. 1)

NAS views the social justice disposition as a "...violation of First Amendment rights" (p. 2) of teacher education candidates.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) (2006) describes itself as "...a national education nonprofit dedicated to academic freedom, academic quality, and accountability" (p. 2). ACTA was founded in 1995 by Lynne Cheney, whose husband has served as Vice-president of the United States under George W. Bush. ACTA's president, Anne Neal, recommended to the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity that "...the certification of NCATE not be renewed until it ceased encouraging education schools to judge students' commitment to politicized concepts such as 'social justice' and 'diversity' via evaluations of their 'dispositions'" (ACTA, 2006, pp. 1-2).

NCATE's decision to expunge social justice from its lexicon leads us to conclude that the accreditor caved in to its critics. Wise did not offer resistance. He did not define what NCATE meant by "social justice." He might have looked to one of the universities that NCATE has accredited for help with a definition. The University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, for example, is one of several dozen teacher education institutions that incorporate social justice within their mission statements or their conceptual frameworks. It includes a clear definition of what social justice means to its faculty, students, and taxpayers:

The Social Justice program will further the university's dedication to the realization of a democratic society that is diverse, inclusive, and equitable and that values the worth of all humans....Among the problems that we seek to address are issues such as racism, violence, literacy, human rights, gender equity, poverty, hunger, and the conservation of the environment. (p. 1)

Arthur Wise did not question how any group (including the three at the hearing) could be opposed to equity in educational matters so that poor children and wealthy children have the same opportunities: the same quality of teachers, materials, and school buildings; the same freedom from pain, hunger, and fear. Instead, Arthur E. Wise, on behalf of his "board," swiftly removed social justice from the lexicon of NCATE so that NCATE might slide through the federal approval process one more time. Moral courage was not exhibited on June 6, 2006. This disregard for America's nonprivileged children is even more disturbing in light of an NCATE boast in "A Decade of Growth 1991-2001": "You know that NCATE does not exist simply to provide recognition to institutions; it exists for the public good—to help protect schoolchildren..." (p. 2).

George A. Pruitt, president of Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey, was a member of NACIQI during the 2006 NCATE hearing. After Wise's final statement that NCATE had "...already informed our institutions that we have no such [social justice] requirement" (p. 292), Dr. Pruitt spoke strongly about the First Amendment, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. Pruitt concluded his remarks by saying,

...I just am saddened by the notion that we have to protect the people that would teach our children from words, and the words that we choose to have to protect them from are two words called "social justice"...I don't think Thomas Jefferson would have any problem at all, if you read his work, having education, public education, associated with the values of social justice. (p. 298, 300)

NCATE's State Connections

Those of us who have studied NCATE for years were not surprised by its capitulation to influential organizations. NCATE's failure to take a stand in support of social justice for America's public school children is not new. This organization that has power over the fate of so many of the nation's teacher education programs and that decides in many states who can or cannot be licensed to teach attends closely to prevailing political winds and takes no stand that possibly could imperil its comfortable existence.

NCATE hosts all-expenses paid "clinics" for key decision makers in state departments of education—the individuals who make or influence the choice of an accreditor of teacher education. Clinics have been held in such lavish surroundings as the AAA Four-Diamond Grand Hotel in Point Clear, Alabama, and the AAA Five-Diamond Stein Eriksen Lodge in Park City, Utah. These magnificent settings boast amenities such as horseback riding, water sports, award winning food and wines, sophisticated spa services and deluxe accommodations (Johnson, Johnson, Farenga, & Ness, 2005). It is at these clinics that state partnership agreements can be made or renewed. It seems that NCATE is using a tactic that long has been employed by for-profit corporations to influence "purchases" and "brand loyalty." These tactics, undertaken in the nation's most luxurious resorts and hotels, are incongruous with NCATE's claim to "help protect school children." At the 2003 NACIQI hearing on NCATE's request for approval as an accreditor, George Pruitt, commenting on NCATE's involvement in certification matters registered a concern about the political ways in which NCATE operates. Pruitt said:

The fact of the matter is that in many states, to even sit for the examination, you have to be graduated from an NCATE accredited school. For NCATE then to be intimately involved in the creation of a national standard, and they are often involved State by State with very well-oiled, well-financed political organizations to influence these processes, in my view, lends to a system that gives more the illusion of quality assurance than the fact of quality assurance. (p. 224)

NCATE Standards

NCATE uses standards to guide its decisions about whether or not to accredit a teacher education program, but its six standards fail to address the critical issues in American education. Johnson, et al. (2005), in an analysis of the NCATE standards, wrote:

There are no NCATE standards that address helping future teachers understand the societal factors that shape our nation's schools. No NCATE standard deals with the pressing problems in American education such as the resegregation of schools, the heavy-handed accountability demands for public schools but not private schools, the unequal funding of public schools, the reduction in school funding in many locales. These and others are the critical factors that affect the success of teachers in schools. No NCATE standards address preparing beginning teachers to deal with hungry or alienated or drug-addicted youth. No NCATE standards address preparing new teachers to teach geometry or geography in an environment of youth gang violence. The NCATE standards, as they exist, serve as placebos that avoid the serious issues of education and society. If an institution can say, "We met the NCATE standards," can that institution feel comfortable that it adequately has prepared beginning teachers to cope with the realities of today's schools? In addition, the NCATE standards do little to encourage future teachers to carefully examine and critique the current education climate. Candidates are not prompted to question the status quo and propose or at least consider innovation or a change for the better. Classroom teachers, especially those in underfunded schools, repeatedly must think of creative solutions to everyday problems, or they will be defeated post haste. (p. 89)

Corporal Punishment

When children are in a secured classroom, they presumably are safe from physical harm. This is not the case in all classrooms—especially for poor and minority children. Although corporal punishment is illegal in 27 states, over 342,000 American students were struck in one school year by educators, according to the most recent data released by the U. S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and compiled by the National Coalition to Abolish Corporal Punishment in Schools (NCACPS, 2003). According to Wilogren (2001), "black students are 2.5 times as likely to be struck [by school personnel] as white students, a reflection of what researchers have long found to be more frequent and harsher discipline for members of minorities" (p. 3). The NCACPS (2003) reported that, "Blacks comprise 17 % of students [in public schools], but receive 39% of paddlings" (p. 6).

Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, Georgia, Missouri, and New Mexico are "the 10 worst states" in the percentage of students hit each year (NCACPS, 2003). Most industrialized nations have outlawed corporal punishment, and many professional organizations have spoken out against its use. These include the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the Council for Exceptional Children, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of School Nurses, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Association for Childhood Education International, and others. One voice is conspicuously silent: NCATE's voice.

The 23 states that permit corporal punishment are all partner states with NCATE. We could find no

statements from NCATE that discourage the striking of children in these states. Unlike the American Medical Association (2006), whose position on corporal punishment “supports the abolition of corporal punishment in schools [and] encourages universities that train teachers to emphasize alternative forms of discipline during their training...” (p. 1), we could locate no evidence that NCATE has spoken out against corporal punishment, or has sanctioned its partner states that permit the practice, or has failed to accredit teacher preparation programs where hitting children is used as a form of discipline in schools that are sites for university practica or student teaching.

NCATE’s refusal to take a stand against corporal punishment is an example of the moral indifference of which Giroux (2006) wrote:

Unfortunately, too many academics retreat into narrow specialisms, allow themselves to become adjuncts of the corporation, or align themselves with dominant interests that serve largely to consolidate authority rather than to critique its abuses. Refusing to take positions on controversial issues or to examine the role they might play in lessening human suffering, such academics become models of moral indifference and examples of what it means to disconnect learning from public life. (p. 64)

NCATE’s continuing moral indifference to issues such as corporal punishment probably made it a simple matter to remove “social justice” from its vocabulary. Does NCATE fail to oppose such travesties as corporal punishment so it does not jeopardize its standing with state officials? Has it aligned itself with the dominant interests to protect NCATE’s power base? When we taught in an underfunded, mostly minority public elementary school in Louisiana a few years ago, paddling was widespread among some of the teachers. One white male teacher paddled a black fourth-grade girl so hard she wet her pants. The male teacher was a graduate of an NCATE-accredited public Louisiana university. Louisiana is an NCATE partner state. On the NCATE testimonials Web page, (N. d.), Cecil J. Picard, former Louisiana State Superintendent of Education, stated: “Louisiana institutions have benefited from NCATE’s rigorous standards for teacher preparation” (p. 2). These “rigorous standards” do not address abusive behavior visited on young schoolchildren. Is corporal punishment consistent with the “caring and fairness” disposition to which NCATE has retreated?

It is these social injustices and others that NCATE has implicitly condoned by not speaking out or using its influence to affect state or federal policy. This indifference to the factors that have major impact on human learning must have made it easy to just drop the term “social justice” from its vocabulary. NCATE has avoided taking a stand on social justice in its standards and its policy statements. It has given tacit approval to distasteful, harmful, and nonsensical practices espoused by powerful policymakers, partners, or friends in high places. There is no shortage on the NCATE Web site of testimonials lauding NCATE. Two categories of testimonials are on the site: “Testimonials from the Policymaker Community” (e.g., Carl Takamura, Executive Director, Hawaii Business Roundtable, Inc.), and “Testimonials from Institutional Leaders” (e.g., Edwin H. Robinson, President, MidAmerica Nazarene University). There are no testimonials from the professors, supervisors, and practitioners who bear the brunt of the endless busywork NCATE requires of accredited institutions [see Johnson, et al., 2005, Chapter 4].

“Diversity” Is Next

Will NCATE eliminate its diversity standard as willingly as it did the words “social justice” when the pressure to do so builds? The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) already has drawn a bead on NCATE’s diversity standard. In a press release (2006) titled, “NCATE concession not enough,” ACTA took aim at “diversity” as well as social justice. NCATE’s Standard 4, Diversity, requires that:

The unit designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and experiences for candidates to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. These experiences include working with diverse higher education and school faculty, diverse candidates, and diverse students in P-12 schools.

ACTA (2006) charges that NCATE-accredited schools "...are confusing social engineering with their job of preparing the next generation of teachers" (p. 4). FIRE (2006) claims, "NCATE's Unit Standard 4 requires students and faculty to demonstrate a commitment to 'diversity,' a term susceptible to highly politicized interpretations" (p. 21). So FIRE, too, with its victory on "social justice," wants more.

In its rush to expand its accreditation network, NCATE has been making international inroads through a partnership with The Center for Quality Assurance in International Education (CQAIE). There is now an NCATE "International Affiliate" category. In February, 2005, the United Arab Emirates University College of Education announced:

The UAEU College of Education has been granted an international academic recognition by the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education (CQAIE) in conjunction with the Washington-based National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)...Out of 1,200 faculties of education in the US, only 600 have been accredited. This fact helps highlight the UAEU College of Education's fresh achievement. NCATE is the first US accreditation body specialized in teacher education, and is the only one so authorized by the US Ministry of Education. (p. 1)

CQAIE (2004) has cautioned that NCATE Standard 4, Diversity, "may or may not be applicable in an international setting...applying the diversity standard (number 4) to an Islamic all-women's institution in another country, would most probably be interpreted for context" (p. 2). This raises the question, when is an NCATE standard not always an NCATE standard? NCATE already has shown a willingness to bend the diversity standard to gain a toehold in an international institution; therefore, it seems likely that NCATE might be expected to surrender its Standard 4, Diversity, if its accreditation status is in jeopardy.

Conclusion

It surely will be our children who will suffer from NCATE's decision to eliminate social justice from its vocabulary. If the term is not in the lexicon, it might not be addressed in schools of education that are required or pressured to seek NCATE accreditation. If social justice is not dealt with in schools of education, how will our future teachers react when confronted with social injustice?

One of our graduate students, Louella Swanson, is an elementary teacher in a Long Island school that serves mostly African American children of poverty. She told us:

We have a new superintendent at my school, and he said that our children are equal to all other children. They are just as smart and intelligent. They can learn; they can get 4s [the highest score rating on New York tests]. Our children *are* equal to other children. But the injustice, abuse, malnutrition, inconsistency, and lack of refuge steal their ability to achieve what most children can. In developing countries, we accept that children have difficult lives and only money and support can help them build to be something better. A child of a third-world ghetto isn't expected to receive a 4 to ensure financial aid; the child is only expected to improve with assistance. The homes my students live in are like the third world. My teaching experience in India was more positive than in my district here on Long Island. Drug abuse, corruption, and unachievable goals have been placed upon my students and me. I teach special education, and my students' future isn't rosy. They live very dangerous lives.

They only have a few years until they are gobbled up by a gang or something else that wants to take them. I need to provide them with skills and I need to nourish their souls because they deserve it and because something in them could strengthen and survive.

Louella will have to continue her work without the help of NCATE.

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