
2007

Ideological Indoctrination and Teacher Education

William Hare
Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, NS, Canada

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hare, William (2007) "Ideological Indoctrination and Teacher Education," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol2/iss2/5>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wvu.edu.

ARTICLE

Ideological indoctrination and teacher education

William Hare

Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, NS, Canada

Philosophers who have been concerned with the problem of indoctrination have focused attention chiefly on teaching, textbooks, and the curriculum in elementary and secondary schools where the age of the students and the fact that they have yet to fully develop their own critical judgment suggests a certain vulnerability and susceptibility to non-rational persuasion. On the one hand, teachers may abuse their power and authority and seek to impose certain beliefs and values, actively discouraging their students from raising problems or objections; on the other hand, certain views may simply escape scrutiny and pass unchallenged in education because they have become part of what Karl Popper (1975) labels uncritical common sense. In either case, the real danger is that young students will become incapable of assessing such views for themselves. Indoctrination results when students lose the ability to assess the merits of the ideas they are studying or coming to acquire and find themselves locked into certain beliefs and assumptions in such a way that they cannot seriously consider alternative views because their minds have been closed.

To counter any tendency towards indoctrination in schools and to prepare students to recognize and resist indoctrination, a conception of education is needed that involves teachers having an open-minded attitude and a commitment to critical questioning in classrooms. In Israel Scheffler's words (1989), the manner of teaching should respect the student's intellectual integrity and capacity for independent judgment. This means that students must be encouraged to develop skills and attitudes that will enable them to assess the reasons and evidence that are thought to support various ideas, to evaluate the credibility of the sources where such ideas originate, and to resist the efforts of those who wish to control their thinking. Students need to keep in mind that new ways of thinking may emerge in the future that will require them to revise the views they have come to hold. They need to recognize that they may fail to notice the controversial character of certain beliefs, and that they may be unconsciously learning to accept without question a general framework of ideas that is closing off alternative ways of thinking. Philosophy of education, with its emphasis on critical thinking, consciousness-raising, and open-mindedness, has done much to remind us of the need to remain vigilant about the danger of indoctrination and authoritarianism in schooling.

Less attention, however, has been paid to the question of whether teachers themselves might be subject to indoctrination in their professional preparation, undermining their own development as critical, open-minded persons. The relative neglect of this question may itself be an example of the power of uncritical common sense if it results from assuming too quickly that teacher education programs, now centred in universities rather than in separate teacher training colleges, necessarily reflect the ideal of disinterested inquiry and critical judgment traditionally associated with universities. Chris Arthur (2004) reminds us that universities are concerned to provide students with the ability to make wise choices, not to promote allegiance to particular positions; skepticism has emerged, however, about how far universities in general, and schools of education in particular, recognize and respect this central ideal in practice.

Doubts were raised some years ago in the UK by John Wilson (1993) who was concerned that teacher educators were beginning to see themselves as "leaders of the faithful" initiating prospective teachers into the proper ideology rather than encouraging them to critically examine the beliefs, assumptions, and values they encounter in educational theory and student teaching placements. In the context of teacher education in the United States, controversy more recently has centred on the Professional Standards promulgated by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE,

2002) and, in particular, on the inclusion of certain dispositions as part of the required professional standards teachers must meet in order to be certified. The Standards require teachers to “know and demonstrate the content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn.” The accompanying Glossary defines dispositions as “guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice.”

Critics have referred to “dispositions theory” as a new tool for enforcing political conformity, but, at first glance, it is difficult to see what could have raised the spectre of indoctrination. Surely dispositions have always been part of the aims that have characterized teacher education. Even with respect to those standards which refer to knowledge and skills, which have not proved particularly controversial, there is an unavoidable connection with dispositions. What value would there be in teachers having certain knowledge and skills if they were not disposed to draw on these intelligently and appropriately in context? In general terms, to have a certain disposition as a teacher is to possess a character trait or a trait of intellect, such as a sense of responsibility, open-mindedness, or critical judgment, and such dispositions describe the kind of person the teacher is and how he or she tends to behave or would behave in certain circumstances (White, 1968; Siegel, 1999).

Faced with a situation, for example, in which a teacher is challenged by a student on a claim he or she has made, an open-minded teacher is disposed to respond in certain ways that are indicative of this attitude, such as listening seriously to the student’s point. This is one typical way in which open-minded teachers generally react in this sort of situation. It is hardly controversial to make such dispositions part of our aims in the professional education of teachers. We do want our teachers to have a sense of responsibility with respect to their work, to present an open-minded account of rival theories in the classroom, to show critical judgment in the interpretation of ideas and comments made by their students, and so on.

Critics, however, have been particularly disturbed by the reference to “social justice,” which they see as prescribing a set of ideological commitments on the left of the political spectrum; and their concerns have been fuelled by a number of widely reported cases where it is alleged that student teachers have been dismissed from teacher education programs when they dissented from the ideological position of their professors or their college. Student teachers have complained of being silenced, and subsequently disciplined, if they raised objections or criticisms to claims made by professors in class on such issues as white-male privilege, affirmative action, gun control, English as the language of oppressors, and so on. Arthur E. Wise, President of NCATE, vehemently denies that the accreditation agency espouses any particular political or social ideology (Wise, 2006). He maintains that NCATE expects teachers to exhibit two professional dispositions, (i) fairness and (ii) the belief that all students can learn; and he suggests that schools of education typically expect student teachers to have the dispositions to be caring, collaborative, and reflective. He suggests that these are dispositions most people would strongly endorse as desirable qualities in teachers.

Various foundations and organizations concerned with civil liberties have become involved in these cases on behalf of the students involved, and accusations and counter-accusations have flown back and forth. In the absence of much more detailed information about what has actually transpired in the cases which have provoked public debate, it is not possible to say with any assurance whether the charge of indoctrination is warranted. What general principles and observations, however, might help us to find our bearings with respect to the fear and suspicion of ideological indoctrination in teacher education? The following points may be all too briefly noted.

1. There are good reasons to regard critical thinking (Siegel, 1988) and open-mindedness (Hare, 1979) as fundamental aims of education for students in school, since the acquisition of these dispositions is central to what is involved in becoming a mature adult who possesses independent

judgment. Such a person is, among other things, capable of detecting pseudoscience and all manner of baloney (Sagan, 1996), empowered to resist indoctrination (Chomsky, 1975), and ready to revisit cherished ideas to determine whether they stand up to criticism (Hare, 2003). It is doubtful that the significance of these dispositions will be appreciated by teachers who have themselves been coerced and bullied in schools of education into accepting certain ideological positions. Teacher educators who curtail wide-ranging and open exploration of ideas in colleges and schools of education show that they place an inappropriate emphasis on what student teachers think rather than on the ability and willingness of these future teachers to think through complex issues for themselves, to base their beliefs on reasons and evidence, and to revise their thinking as appropriate.

2. Where ideological indoctrination is paramount, prospective teachers are denied the very experience of free and open discussion that would provide them with the practice needed to consolidate those skills and dispositions that would in time foster a spirit of inquiry in their own classrooms and would help to make them more reflective practitioners. To insist on a particular ideology in teacher education programs effectively prevents student teachers from genuinely exploring questions, disagreements, qualifications, problems, ambiguities, counterexamples, and alternative ideas. It constitutes a threat to the honest and disinterested pursuit of truth and to the flourishing of the intellectual virtues (Murphy, 2004). It is disturbing also to think that teachers who are pressured to conform to the views of their education professors are unlikely to be able or willing to resist other (perhaps more sinister) ideologies they encounter once they are in the field.
3. The attempt to foster such dispositions as critical thinking and open-mindedness in prospective teachers is not itself, as sometimes suggested, a kind of ideological indoctrination. The latter involves the acquisition of an unquestioning and dogmatic attitude with respect to one's beliefs; critical thinking and open-mindedness are precisely what are needed to thwart this result. There would be no concern about indoctrination if we did not value these dispositions. It goes without saying, of course, that the supposed merits of the abilities and dispositions that constitute critical thinking and open-mindedness must also be subject to critical scrutiny and open-minded review by teachers and students alike; the case for these skills and attitudes needs to be examined in the educational context, not taken for granted. It is equally mistaken to regard the fostering of these dispositions as indoctrination on the grounds that they involve an implicit rejection of traditional views. First, traditional views may well pass the test of critical examination and emerge all the stronger for having withstood scrutiny; second, they may be rejected just because alternative ideas have been uncritically and dogmatically embraced.
4. If critical thinking and open-mindedness are justifiably regarded as aims of education, then teaching at every level needs to be conducted in an inquiring spirit which encourages questioning, constructive skepticism, the consideration of alternative points of view, the appeal to evidence, and a determination to follow the argument where it leads. If a genuine spirit of inquiry is fostered in the classroom, the teacher's own particular opinions (on controversial matters of social justice and so on) should be of little interest, as John Stuart Mill (1982) observes, because such opinions, even if they become known to the students, will be subject to the same critical scrutiny as any other views. If this sounds idealistic, it shows that teaching in an inquiring spirit is enormously difficult; but then developing the ability and the disposition to teach in this way is where our energies need to be devoted in teacher education, not towards inculcating ideological conformity.
5. One unfortunate consequence of ideological conviction in teachers is that they are focussed on their students coming to certain approved conclusions and tend to miss the evidence, clear enough to impartial observers, that the students are not really developing into critical thinkers at

all, even though critical thinking is one of the teacher's professed aims. One teacher (Sweeney, 1993-4) who sets out to make her fourth-grade students into activists in the cause of social justice seems proud, rather than acutely embarrassed, when one of her young students roundly proclaims that "you're not going to read the truth about Columbus in the encyclopedia. They leave out half the story and so do most books" (25). It is evident that the student is in no position to support this sweeping assertion; she has merely been brought to think this way by her teacher. What might be a critical judgment if made by the teacher amounts to nothing more than uncritical allegiance by the student to a point of view for which there has been considerable propaganda in the classroom.

6. Dispositions, of course, are acquired gradually over the course of growing up and become part of who we are in such a way that they cannot easily be changed (McKnight, 2004). By the time students enter teacher education programs, they already have certain ingrained dispositions that may or may not be desirable in the context of teaching. This underlines the importance of trying to select for admission student teachers who appear to have the kinds of intellectual virtues and moral character traits which are central to good teaching (Hare, 1993). We may have to rely here quite heavily on referees who know the applicants well and on the best judgments we can make at the interview stage. David Solway (1989) remarks that teachers cannot be trained, they must be found. This is compatible, of course, with trying to further enhance the dispositions of prospective teachers during the program of teacher education.
7. We need to be cautious in making negative assessments about the dispositions of the student teachers in our programs. So much is at stake and the opportunity to make the necessary observations is so limited. Dispositions cannot, for example, be easily and confidently ascribed on the basis of what prospective teachers may say in essays or discussions. (And they should never be based on what a professor may see scribbled in a student's textbook, as is alleged to have happened in one case.) Students in philosophy of education courses may challenge a view presented by their professor simply because they believe, along with Mill, that unless a view is vigorously contested, it will be held as a prejudice. Moreover, prospective teachers who express personal disagreement with affirmative action, for example, may still uphold the policy in practice if it is a policy in the school district where they teach; by contrast, those who profess allegiance to such views may well violate or undermine these principles in practice.
8. What counts as social justice is typically controversial, and reasonable people who are equally well informed and committed to justice will disagree. Agreement at a general level is often accompanied by disagreement about particular cases. Teachers who are equally determined to avoid any hint of racism in their classrooms may well disagree about whether a particular book, comment, person, or practice is racist. Everyone may agree with the general proposition that "all students can learn," but does this mean that a teacher who thinks that not all students can learn high school algebra (Noddings, 2001) is somehow not suitable for the profession? Adapting a point made by Russell (1985) with respect to experts, we can say that where a matter is *controversial*, no position can be regarded as certain. To demand conformity to one particular view on a controversial matter cannot be appropriate; it is clearly dishonest and shows a lack of respect for other people and their opinions (Bridges, 1986).
9. Teacher educators need to model such virtues as open-mindedness and critical thinking and to create an atmosphere in their own classes where these dispositions can flourish (Tishman, Jay & Perkins, 1993). They need to explore with prospective teachers what these virtues would involve in particular pedagogical contexts, making use of case studies and examples from the students' own practical experience. There is also a great deal of confusion about these virtues in circulation, such as the idea that critical thinking is always negative or that open-mindedness

involves relativism. If not identified, these confusions can lead to student teachers becoming cynical about the value of these fundamental qualities.

10. None of this is to say that teacher educators should not try to persuade prospective teachers that certain views, practices, and policies with respect to social justice and other controversial matters are justifiable. Setting an example of critical thinking and open-mindedness does not preclude taking a stance and defending a particular point of view with respect to an issue of social justice (Hare, 1985). Everything depends upon the manner in which this is done. The general criteria are clear: Rival views must be given a fair hearing; reasons and evidence must be provided to support favoured positions; questions and challenges must be encouraged and given due consideration; and there must be no requirement or expectation (stated or implied) that student teachers come to share the substantive views defended by their professors. In the absence of these conditions, defensible partiality will degenerate into ideological propaganda.

References

- Arthur, C. (2004). What are universities for? *Contemporary Review* 285: 146-49.
- Bridges, D. (1986). Dealing with controversy in the curriculum: A philosophical perspective. In J. J. Wellington (Ed.), *Controversial Issues in the Curriculum* (pp. 19-38). Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Chomsky, N. (1975). Towards a humanistic conception of education. In W. Feinberg and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (Eds.), *Work, Technology, and Education* (pp. 204-20). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Hare, W. (2003). The ideal of open-mindedness and its place in education. *Journal of Thought* 38: 3-10.
- Hare, W. (1993). *What makes a good teacher?* London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Hare, W. (1985). Open-mindedness in the classroom. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 19, 2.
- Hare, W. (1979). *Open-mindedness and education*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- McKnight, D. (2004). An inquiry into NCATE's move into virtue ethics by way of dispositions (Is this what Aristotle meant?). *Educational Studies* 35, 3: 212-30.
- Mill, J. S. (1982). Notes on the newspapers. In J. M. Robson (Ed.), *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* Vol. 6 (p. 228). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Murphy, J. B. (2004). Against civic schooling. *Social Philosophy and Policy* 21, 1: 221-65.
- NCATE (2002). *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education*. Washington: National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.
- Noddings, N. (2001). Thinking about standards. In William Hare and John P. Portelli (Eds.), *Philosophy of Education: Introductory Readings* (pp. 399-409). Calgary: Detselig Enterprises.
- Popper, K. (1975). How I see philosophy. In Charles J. Bontempo and S. Jack Odell (Eds.), *The owl of Minerva* (pp. 41-55). New York: McGraw-Hill.

- Russell, B. (1985). *Sceptical essays*. London: Unwin.
- Sagan, C. (1996). *The demon-haunted world*. New York: Random House.
- Scheffler, I. (1989). *Reason and teaching*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Siegel, H. (1988). *Educating reason* New York: Routledge.
- Siegel, H. (1999). What (good) are thinking dispositions? *Educational Theory* 49, 2: 207-21.
- Solway, D. (1989). *Education lost: Reflections on contemporary pedagogical practice*. Toronto: OISE Press.
- Sweeney, M. (1993-4). Columbus, a hero? Rethinking Columbus in an elementary classroom. *Radical Teacher* 43: 25-29.
- Tishman, S, Jay, E, and Perkins, D. N. (1993). Teaching thinking dispositions: From transmission to enculturation. *Theory into Practice* 32: 147-53.
- White, A. R. (1968). *The philosophy of mind*. New York: Random House.
- Wilson, J. (1993). *Reflection and practice*. London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Wise, A. (2006). A statement from NCATE on professional dispositions.
http://www.ncate.org/public/0616_MessageAWise.asp?ch=150.