RESCUING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION:
A CRITIQUE OF THE NCATE CONTROVERSY

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In 2006 the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) removed the phrase "social justice" from its glossary definition of dispositions.[1] Initially, many educators were disappointed by what seemed like an abrupt removal of this educational value. But in the years since, little has been said or done to understand what, exactly, happened behind the scenes to prompt NCATE to abandon its commitment to the value of social justice. In this paper, my aim is to both reconstruct the story of how this apparently controversial principal was quietly taken out of NCATE's glossary, and to examine the motives behind the decision to remove social justice from educational discourse. Why did these two words become a threat to so many policy makers? What do these words mean to those who acted to remove them? In the process of investigating this obscure bureaucratic action, I discovered, among other things, that the claim of NCATE's political neutrality—a status it conveniently designates for itself—needs to be exposed as a demonstrable falsehood.

First, I want to clarify the political intricacies of this bureaucratic exclusion. Once this background is clearly understood, I then address several questions: How should "social justice" be conceptualized? What ought to be the defining features of "social justice" education? In my concluding section, I respond to these questions by describing two modes of social justice education, internal and external, which might permit teachers to embrace the values of social justice without the conventional trappings of political indoctrination. By redefining social justice in terms of Maxine Greene's concept of "wide-awakeness," I hope to liberate social justice from the narrow definition its opponents have projected upon it as mere ideology and indoctrination. As a viable alternative, I argue that in the United States democratic education is, in crucial ways indebted to the very idea of social justice both historically and philosophically. The removal of social justice from NCATE's vocabulary of concern could therefore be seen as a violation of the values and aims of democratic education. I hope to show that social justice in education should be seen not so much as an alien "radical social agenda" but as a set of values central to the American democratic project.

NCATE'S REAUTHORIZATION HEARING: CONSTRUCTING "SOCIAL JUSTICE" AS A "RADICAL SOCIAL AGENDA"

NCATE's 2005 Professional Standards is a 61-page document. Prior to its removal a year later, the term "social justice" appeared once, on page 53

in the glossary of terms. The passage describes educator dispositions and reads as follows: "Dispositions are guided by beliefs and attitudes related to values such as caring, fairness, honesty, responsibility, and social justice."[2] Given the late placement and singular use of the term, why did "social justice" become such a public target? What were the larger political forces that sought to extract social justice from the NCATE protocols? Why did NCATE and its leadership decide not to keep social justice in the standards document, nor to engage the larger community in a defense of these values in education?

In June 2006, NCATE officials met with the U.S. Department of Education's National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) to reauthorize their standing as the accrediting agency of teacher education programs. Prior to the hearing with NACIQI, NCATE received statements from other organizations that criticized NCATE's use of social justice. Thus, officials at NCATE knew well beforehand that the phrase "social justice" would likely be subject to challenge. Other groups in attendance were the National Association of Scholars (NAS), the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA). Specifically, these organizations had released statements which linked the language of social justice to the promotion of "political ideology" in the education of teachers. It was clear from the outset that NCATE would face strong opposition to this policy issue, and potentially could lose its authority to act as the national accreditation agency of teacher education programs if this dangerous phrase—*social justice*—was not abandoned.

The hearings that followed generated a litany of accusations against social justice and the use of dispositions in general. These accusations were met with surprisingly little resistance by those in education, particularly those in social foundations of education. The NAS issued a statement describing their concern: "the mischief inherent in the use of as ideologically fraught a term as 'social justice'… [a] concept so variable in meaning as necessarily to subject students to the ideological caprices of instructors and programs."[3] NAS continued to focus attention on the "ideological caprices" that were said to lurk behind the social justice protocol, and on their assumption that social justice in education results in "programmatic political tests." [4] Consequently, in defining "social justice" as "programmatic political tests" and "ideological caprices," alternative conceptualizations are omitted. In this manner, opponents of the concept successfully represented social justice as something alien and intrinsically ideological.

The next group to offer a critique on behalf of the anti-social justice campaign was FIRE. Although FIRE expressed a larger concern that the use of dispositions in general is a flawed method by which to evaluate teacher candidates, one spokesman took specific aim at social justice: "The use of a "social justice" disposition in particular, leads directly to the adoption of

ideological litmus tests for teacher candidates at education schools."[5] Reinforcing these criticisms, ACTA's president, Anne Neal, who not uncoincidentially sits on the NACIQI committee, made her recommendation:

> 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" . . . The Department of Education should demand clearly defined principles which relate directly to a prospective teacher's future success—namely skills and subject matter knowledge—not feelings, values, and "dispositions."[6]

Similar to the NAS and FIRE perspectives, Neal's criticism was not only centered on social justice but also the larger vision of "depoliticizing" higher education: "It is remarkably short-sighted to think that eliminating a few words eliminates the problem of education school politicization."[7] The grievances described by ACTA concluded with a strong indictment of the overall mission of colleges of education: "ACTA will continue to fight taxpayer funded education schools . . . [that] are viewing themselves as activist institutions and are confusing social engineering with their job of preparing the next generation of teachers."[8]

In response to these critical statements, Arthur Wise, then president of NCATE, offered no explanation as to why social justice might be useful to the profession. Instead, Wise appeared to acquiesce to this "reform" measure: "On behalf of NCATE, I categorically deny the allegation that NCATE has a standard or requirement on, quote, "social justice"—unquote."[9] Technically speaking, NCATE never did have an official standard or requirement for social justice; the phrase was only used to define the term dispositions within the glossary. Furthermore, Wise did remark on the unsettled meaning of social justice: "I have come to learn, painfully over the last year . . . 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."[10] What *new* "radical social agenda" is Wise referring to? It is crucial to note that Wise did not introduce any counter definition of social justice or explain its intended purpose, or why it was included in the standards to begin with. Nor did Wise choose to discuss any legitimate educative role social justice might play within the nation's culturally diverse classrooms.

There was, however, one NACIQI official who pushed back against the notion that social justice is properly defined as a "radical social agenda." George A. Pruitt, president of Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey, stated, "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."[11] Why weren't statements like this forthcoming from within the

leadership of NCATE? After all, the term was located within one of its own documents and is often used to describe the mission of colleges of education throughout the country.

EXPOSING THE POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

In investigating this controversy, I began to wonder: whose interests does NACIQI represent and what is their intended purpose? According to the committee's charter their purpose is to advise "the Secretary of Education on matters related to accreditation and to the eligibility and certification process for institutions of higher education."[12] During the period under review here, members of NACIQI were appointed by Secretaries of Education Rod Paige or Margaret Spelling. Not surprisingly, committee members embodied the values of President George W. Bush's administration. The committee was led by Carol D'Amico, whose ideology clearly embraces a business model of education vested in the interest of "producing" students that serve the economic interests of the state.[13] One researcher, Doug Lederman, found that many of the members had close ties to the Bush administration: 27% of the board were Texans (only 7% of college students nationally are from Texas), and more than 20% of the board represents for-profit institutions of higher education.[14]

What is most troubling is not that many of these members were from Texas and were political appointees of former President Bush, but rather what "Texas and Bush" have come to represent for education. The state of Texas is the birthplace of high-stakes testing, institutional cheating to achieve the desired results, the testing ground for the textbook industry, and the use of deceptive techniques to misrepresent dropout rates. In several ways, Texas could be regarded as the symbolic egg from which NCLB was hatched. It appears that the general motive behind this "reform" movement is to dismantle and privatize public education.[15] From vouchers and school choice to alternative for-profit institutions, these approaches tend to reduce education to a private business transaction with no legitimate public face. Analysis of these groups expose the political interests and aims of the NACIQI committee members and illuminate how those who claim to want to neutralize teacher education are by no means neutral themselves. A cursory review of those appointees and their public pronouncements suggest that their own "radical social agenda" is to de-democratize the role of public education.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE PHILOSOPHERS GONE?

Recent trends in education which value technocratic and quantifiable aspects of education has led to the marginalization of philosophy of education, social justice education, critical pedagogy, and any other project that does not explicitly stay within the paradigm of NCLB. Assessment, accountability, standards, and the production of teachers and students that can meet the prescribed adequate yearly progress has significantly shifted the conversation

away from *education* and instead rests firmly on notions of *schooling*. Aside from FIRE, NAS, ACTA, NCATE, and the NACIQI board members, no other parties were represented at the hearings. Why did NCATE officials choose not to seek counsel from other interested parties? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that NCATE did not want to create a forum for discussing the boundaries or aims of the phrase. Pursuing this line of questioning, Dan Butin recently observed:

> There was literally no one sitting behind Arthur Wise willing and able to defend the other side to the committee, namely, there was no one who could speak to the ancient origins of, societal consensus around, and empirical evidence for social justice as a cause for all individuals (and especially for future teachers) in a democratic and pluralistic society. [16]

The ease with which NCATE removed the term and abandoned an historic tenet of democratic education is disturbing. Clearly NACIQI pressured NCATE to discard the language of social justice, and the would-be proponents of social justice were absent and perhaps negligent in their indifference to this bureaucratic maneuver.

The lack of debate surrounding the removal of social justice can also be seen in light of the Council of Social Foundations of Education (CSFE) removing itself from NCATE in 2004. To date, CSFE has no plans to re-enter the policy arena of NCATE. In this regard, Joseph Watras has noted, "As far as I know, CSFE will never return to NCATE. As a result, I am pessimistic about the future of foundations of education."[17] The list of NCATE member organizations is long and varied, and the absence of CSFE is rather conspicuous. CSFE and NCATE's relationship goes back 29 years and had been one of mutual respect and cooperation.[18] According to Erskine Dottin, Alan Jones, Douglas Simpson, and Joe Watras, the relationship "dissolved over issues of financing, cost-effectiveness, and organizational philosophy."[19] Each year NCATE member organizations must pay member dues, currently set at $18,000. CSFE had never been able to pay the full dues; regardless, NCATE allowed the Council to stay on at a reduced rate. This "gentleman's agreement" was arranged because historically CSFE was apparently too fragmented to raise such an amount.

The discipline of social foundations has had an ambivalent relationship with efforts to professionalize education. Philosophical grievances with what are perceived to be technocratic visions of education have led to a collective sigh at the thought of continually jumping through bureaucratic hoops to remain "relevant." However, Dottin, Jones, Simpson, and Watras express their concern with this ambivalence: "Foundations scholars can indeed participate in a system such as NCATE and at the same time offer observations, interpretations, and criticisms of the system."[20] There is reason to believe that

the disengagement of social foundations from national accreditation agencies is short-sighted and has left many to feel uncertain about the discipline's future. The decision by CSFE to abandon NCATE is particularly problematic because the only branch of education explicitly charged with offering critical perspectives on educational policy is CSFE. Without the active participation of CSFE in NCATE, who will speak for the values embodied in a critical social perspective of education?

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS A DEMOCRATIC "MODE OF BEING"

In a sense, to examine NCATE's decision to abandon social justice is to examine the history of conflict that exists between liberal and conservative social, political, and educational values. [21] This inquiry raises one overriding question: How should social justice be conceptualized so that it is more widely accepted as a viable lens through which educators can help students better interpret themselves and their world? How might we conceptualize social justice so as to avoid its reduction to political indoctrination? Of course, the concept of social justice is highly contested and open to contradictory interpretations. To concretely "define" social justice in a formulaic way, however, would tame its insurgent democratic nature. Without being overly formulaic, I want to describe what I consider to be two distinct yet interrelated images of social justice education; images that are reliant upon each other in the achievement of democratic education.

The first form can be described as an external version of social justice whose purpose is to expose and alter the institutions which perpetuate systemic oppression. While these systemic structures are external to the individual, they are implicating variables in the oppression individuals may experience. External barriers and institutional limitations hinder the individual from achieving access to opportunities that lay outside the self. This form of social justice is typically grounded in a Marxist or Freirean critique of the world that examines social inequalities that perpetuate an unjust social order. This tradition has been successful in articulating multiple perspectives to emancipate the voice of those historically ignored. The minority voice, the feminist voice, the homosexual voice, and the voice of those in poverty have been given priority and value within this form of social justice. Although this model is necessary to describe social reality, as a pedagogical approach it is unlikely to avoid the charge from conservatives as being overly ideological and therefore representing a means for indoctrination. In addition to the basic content of knowledge this type of inquiry represents, perhaps the real threat lies in that education of this sort aims to *change* oppressive structures and institutions, a vision that many resist.

A second framework for understanding social justice education can be described as an internal version which assists individuals in perceiving oppressive patterns that affect themselves and by extension, all human beings. The individual struggle to attain what Maxine Greene calls the ability to "speak

for oneself," can be seen as representing an internal conception of social justice education.[22] Social justice education as a means of personal emancipation is symbolically reminiscent of Plato's allegory of the cave in which education is viewed as a turning around of the soul, from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge; or, as Freire defines conscientization, from "submersion to emergence."[23] According to this model, social justice is dedicated to the enlightenment project of each student, no matter what demographic category they represent.

Additionally, the assumptions made in the external form of social justice, left unchallenged, are deeply problematic and result in the resistance of many students in classrooms.[24] For example, the assumption may be that the white male student has had a life of privilege and the black female student one of oppression. These types of assumptions, by both teacher and student, can hinder ones' ability to critically examine the world through multiple standpoints. In fact, despite our best intentions, many of these students simply disengage entirely from class. However, if social justice in education can be presented as a personal search for understanding, possibly many more students and skeptics could begin to see the value of this type of education. In this sense, educators might begin to view the combined values of social justice as constituting a personal mode of being, one that shares deep conceptual affinities with John Dewey's theory of democratic identity as a "mode of being." It is worth recalling that Dewey called on teachers and schools to become agents of individual transformation. For Dewey, the purpose of education "to make the public school an energetic and willing instrument in developing courage, power and personal ability in each individual."[25]

Social justice understood as a "mode of being" can be a vehicle for developing what Maxine Greene calls "wide-awakeness." Greene, borrowing from Alfred Schutz, describes wide-awakeness as, "a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in as an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements."[26] For this type of desirable condition to occur one must come to know the reality of the social world. If schools continue to ignore the difficult realities of poverty and systemic oppression generally, students will be unable to comprehend the world with any degree of accuracy. However, once students are able to describe their situatedness, they can begin to question and inquire into why the world is the way it is and why they are the way they are. Questions about the construction of identity might stimulate students to imagine themselves in light of what they now know of the world. The social present becomes the personal. All this suggests that a dialectical relationship exists between the external and internal modes of social justice education, a framework which treats the "psyche" and the "city" as interdependent. [27]

Social justice education becomes a moral democratic end if it is conceived as both a social and personal way of life capable of shaping the identity formation of citizens. For Dewey, democracy as a way of life consisted

of "the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life."[28] Properly conceived, social justice education offers educators a means for similar character formation in students, one that is essential in the creation of citizens who value equality. If we can agree that democracy is predicated on the belief in human equality, on what William Ayers calls the "recognition" of the diversity of human experience within a culture, then social justice becomes the agent of certain values through which democracy can be achieved. Understood in the context of democracy and equality, social justice emerges as a central tenet of the American democratic tradition.

As we learn the intricate methods that were employed to remove social justice from the NCATE vocabulary, educators should pause to consider what the consequences of this omission may mean in terms of (mis)shaping educational discourse. Without social justice oriented forms of discourse, consider what is omitted, consider what potential educative conversations will fail to materialize for future teachers. If the most democratic movements in U.S. history embodied values of social justice, such as the abolitionist movement, the suffragette movement, and the civil rights movement, then it follows that American democracy is indebted to "radical social agendas" for keeping the fragile project alive. To deny this element of the national tradition as somehow outside the knowledge base that teacher candidates should learn is to alienate them from what is most democratic in United States history.

In the wake of NCATE's decision, Arthur Wise issued the following statement explaining the contested character of social justice discourse: "To most Americans, the phrase 'social justice' is positive and connotes values associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. To critics of the phrase, it is negative and connotes a dangerous if unspecified social and political ideological agenda of indoctrination."[29] Exactly what is the "dangerous if unspecified social and political ideological agenda of indoctrination"? If social justice in education were taken to its most extreme end, where would it arrive? Perhaps the most radical end of social justice involves the principle at the heart of the Declaration of Independence—equality. Arguably, it is the very tensions that exist in the social justice discourse that make them so necessary today for teacher educators to identify and study. By engaging the complicated and ambiguous, students will be offered entry into the predicaments of American civic education.

Critics of social justice have argued that ideology, indoctrination, and liberal political values are somehow intrinsic to the social justice concept in education. Yet, how often do these critics ever consider that the values of social justice are intrinsic to the project of democracy? A sense of equality is not innate, it does not present itself automatically but rather must be nurtured through active dialogue, revision, dissent, and questioning. Democratic education infused with social justice aims must include perennial questions as

outlined by Ayers: "Education for what? Education for whom? Education toward what kind of social order?"[30] These questions and the conversations they are capable of engendering should not to be omitted, but given the pluralistic nature of American classrooms, should be revalued and given more curricular space in teacher education programs. As Greene reminds us, "Learning involves a willingness to pose disturbing questions, to take risks, to look through new perspectives upon the familiar life-world."[31] The principles of democracy and the aims of social justice demand that educators *take risks, pose disturbing questions,* and *look through new perspectives.* Moreover, these processes must also occur within the larger social justice education community rather than simply abandoning NCATE due to the perception that it is a flawed bureaucratic system. For those of us committed to social justice education, we should begin the task of rescuing "social justice" from the distortions that have been imposed upon it as a result of the NCATE controversy.

NOTES

[1] Another part of this debate includes NCATE's refusal to add the language of sexual orientation and/or gender identity to its list of potential characteristics of diversity. For more on this issue, see Kevin K. Kumashiro, "The Institutionalization of Bias," *The Seduction of Common Sense: How the Right Has Framed the Debate on America's Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 53-57. Also, Therese Quinn: http://www.therese-othereye.blogspot.com (accessed April 29, 2008).

[2] National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions* (Washington, DC: NCATE, 2005)*, http://www.ncate.org/public/standards.asp (accessed April 15, 2008).

[3] National Association of Scholars, "NCATE Drops 'Social Justice' as Accreditation Standard; NAS Is Pleased," Press Release (June 5, 2006), http://www.nas.org/polPressReleases.cfm?Doc_Id=56 (accessed April 15, 2008).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Freedom for Individual Rights in Education. "FIRE Statement on NCATE's Encouragement of Political Litmus Tests in Higher Education," Press Release

(June 2006), http://www.thefire.org/index.php/article/7079.html (accessed April 15, 2008).

[6] American Council of Trustees and Alumni. "NCATE concession not enough," Press Release (June 7, 2006), http://www.goactablog.org/blog/archives/2006/06/ncate_concessio.html (accessed April 15, 2008).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). "Transcript of hearing on reapproval of NCATE" (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, June 2006) (accessed April 15, 2008).

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), "Mission Statement," http://www.ed.gov/about/bdcomm/list/naciqi.html (accessed April 15, 2008).

[13] National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI), "Committee Members," http://www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/naciqi.html#members (accessed April 15, 2008). Carol D'Amico is described by the U.S. Department of Education as bringing "extensive experience in advising corporate and government leaders on how to strengthen the American economy through educational policy and workforce development strategies." See http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/damico.html (accessed March 26, 2009).

[14] Doug Lederman, "Stacking the Deck," *Inside HigherEd* (May 2007), http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/05/01/naciqi (accessed April 29, 2008).

[15] Michael Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality.* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[16] Dan Butin, "Dark Times Indeed: NCATE, Social Justice, and the Marginalization of Multicultural Foundations," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 1, no.1 (2006), http://www.wce.wwu.edu/Resources/CEP/eJournal/v002n002/a003.shtml (accessed April 29, 2008).

[17] Joseph Watras, Email interview conducted April 2, 2008.

[18] Erskine Dottin, Alan Jones, Douglas Simpson, & Joseph Watras, "Representing the Social Foundations of Education in NCATE: A Chronicle of Twenty-Five Years of Effort," *Educational Studies*, 38, no. 3 (2005): 241-254.

[19] Ibid., 241-254.

[20] Ibid., 250.

[21] The charge by conservatives that education, especially foundations of education, is a form of indoctrination can be traced back to the beginning of the discipline. See for example, *Social Frontier* 1, no. 4 (1935). The question of indoctrination in response to William Randolph Hearst's accusations that universities employ "red" professors is explored in depth in this issue of the *Social Frontier* by George S. Counts (then editor of journal), John Dewey, Boyd H. Bode, George A. Coe, and others.

[22] Maxine Greene, "The Matter of Justice," *Teachers College Record,* 75, no 2 (1973):183.

[23] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 81.

[24] For a comprehensive discussion of this aspect, see Barbara Applebaum, "Is Teaching for Social Justice a 'Liberal Bias'?" *Teachers College Record,* 111, no. 2 (2009): 376-408.

[25] John Dewey. "Nationalizing Education," *The Essential Dewey Vol. 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy,* Eds. Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 269.

[26] Maxine Greene, "Toward Wide-Awakeness: An Argument for the Arts and Humanities in Education," *Teachers College Record,* 79, no. 1 (1977): 119-125.

[27] For further discussion of the interdependence of the city and the psyche, see Jonathan Lear, "Inside and Outside the Republic." *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays.* Ed. Richard Kraut (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997): 64.

[28] John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us," *The Essential Dewey Vol. 1: Pragmatism, Education, Democracy,* Eds. Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998): 341.

[29] Arthur Wise, "A Statement from NCATE on Professional Dispositions," NCATE webpage (2006),
http://www.ncate.org/public/0616_MessageAWise.asp?ch=150 (accessed July 1, 2008).

[30] Bill Ayers, "Social Justice and Teaching," Weblog (2008), see http://billayers.wordpress.com/2008/05/07/social-justice-and-teaching (accessed May 15, 2008).

[31] Greene, "The Matter of Justice": 184.