

## Social Justice as a Disposition for Teacher Education Programs: Why is it Such a Problem?

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**Abstract:** The authors question the actions of National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) leadership for removing *social justice* in the glossary of terms to describe dispositions for education graduates, trace the origins of the multiple discourses surrounding social justice, and argue for *problematizing* social justice issues.

“The challenge of social justice is to evoke a sense of community that we need to make our nation a better place, just as we need to make it a safe place” (Edelman, n.d.).

The challenge of social justice as described by Marian Edelman in the quote above has been addressed by many scholars and practitioners who are re-conceptualizing teaching and teacher education in terms of social justice (Cochran-Smith, 1999; Noddings, 2005). Previously, we have raised a series of thorny questions that permeate the social justice discourses (Landorf & Nevin, under review; Landorf, Rocco, & Nevin, 2007). Is social justice about leveling the playing field or giving the same rights to everyone? Are there cases where one person’s demand for social justice takes away another person’s equal rights? Where do issues of cultural difference fit into the notion of social justice? In other words, what does social justice mean? Social justice is a complicated, knotty concept which teacher educators as well as k-12 teachers and their students must constantly question.

Ironically, social justice for teacher education has become a politically incorrect term in the United States. For the last decade or so, the term *social justice* was included in a glossary that the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) provided as an example of a disposition a program might consider when evaluating a teaching candidate’s disposition and classroom readiness. Professional dispositions are defined as behaviors that support student learning and development and are consistent with ideas of fairness and the belief that all students can learn, and are important ways of interacting that undergird professional interactions with students, colleagues, parents, and community.

However, when appearing before the U. S. Education Department’s National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity in June, Wise (2006), the president of NCATE, categorically denied that NCATE has a mandatory social justice standard, saying instead that NCATE does not endorse any political and social ideologies. Wise’s statement makes it very clear that there is no professional mandate or national policy with respect to the role of social justice in teacher education. NCATE leadership’s decision to remove references to social justice from descriptions of NCATE accreditation standards stands in sharp contrast with leading educational researchers who call for social justice in teacher education (e.g., Banks, 2003; 2004; Cochran-Smith, 1999). Although tracing other sources and the history of the term in the glossary is beyond the scope of this article, we believe that part of the reason there is resistance to include social justice in national policy is precisely that it is a complicated notion. As the term social justice is usually used, it implies the increase of rights for the marginalized, which by so doing, may seem to exclude the majority, who then become the other.

### *Problematizing Social Justice*

For some, social justice is a virtue, defined as moral excellence (Merriam-Webster, 2007). When social justice is defined in this way, the term can be ascribed only to the reflective and deliberate acts of individuals rather than to a social system. Social justice as a virtue refers to processes in which an individual works with and/or organizes others for the good of a community. Social justice rooted in individual virtue is not a goal toward which individuals and institutions should converge by law. Others define social justice as a societal ideal, based on the idea of a society which gives fair treatment a just share of its benefits to all individuals and groups. When social justice is defined in this way, the term refers to an egalitarian notion in which historical inequities insofar as they affect current injustices should be corrected until the actual inequities no longer exist or have been perceptively "negated."

We do not take a stand on the definition of social justice. Instead, we recognize, and embrace, the dialectic in the processes of social justice. One way to frame the dialectic is in terms of equity vs. equality. That is, the promotion of equity typically addresses injustices suffered by oppressed classes, whereas the promotion of equality typically attempts to meet the needs of all members of society. Another way to frame the dialectic is in terms of the placement of morals. Typically, morals within the individual reflect issues of equity, whereas morals placed within the community reflect issues of equality. We recognize the dialectic of social justice and encourage teacher educators, teachers, and students to wrestle with different notions of social justice as part of the curriculum.

We use the term ironically when referring to the NCATE decision to remove the term social justice as one example of dispositions precisely because the history of American education can trace changes that have resulted on behalf of marginalized others gaining access to education. The very existence of schools in the 13 colonies can be laid on the doorstep of activists who sought refuge on the shores of the frontier so as to free themselves from religious oppression in England and Europe. In fact, Uriah Levy, an American naval hero who banned flogging as an example of an egregious failure of social justice, once said, "Social justice is the hallmark of democracy" (as cited in a documentary aired by the Public Broadcasting System, 2006, December). The extension of the right to an education to women as per the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution (1920), children from culturally and linguistically diverse families as per *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), and children with disabilities as per P.L. 94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) stem from a sense of social justice.

### **Social Justice Dispositions in Teacher Education Programs**

Johnson (n.d.), a professor of history at CUNY-Brooklyn, searched the mission statements of teacher education programs which included social justice terminology for their teacher candidates. Excerpts from mission statements from two programs identified by Johnson (n.d.) illustrate the terminology and intent of the term. At George Mason University in Virginia, teachers must demonstrate a disposition for a "commitment to democratic values and social justice," including such inherently political requirements as understanding "systemic issues that prevent full participation" and "advocate for practices that promote equity and access" (Johnson, n.d., ¶ 35). At the University of Vermont, "The ultimate purpose of these activities [in the Education Program] is to create a more humane and just society, free from oppression, that fosters respect for ethnic and cultural diversity, and maximizes human potential and the quality of life for all individuals, families and communities" (Johnson, n.d., ¶ 34).

The particular virtues related to social justice that were cited, although different, included democratic values, humane and just communities, educational equity, and social responsibility.

As a conceptual framework, social justice is alive and well. We conclude that social justice issues continue to intrigue scholars, researchers, and teacher educators. As shown in the excerpted mission statements, both undergraduate and graduate programs in the preparation of education professionals indicate that social justice as a conceptual framework is alive and well.

### **Examples of Social Justice Issues for Teacher Educators**

In this section, to anchor the concepts of social justice, we describe two current issues facing American educators, notably k-12 public schools as well as universities where teacher education programs are housed, that remain unresolved — racial preference quotas and inclusion of special education students in mainstream classrooms. Both issues illustrate the complexity of the notion and implementation of social justice, and for this reason, we find them to be ripe for study in teacher education programs.

#### *Issue #1: Racial Preference Quotas*

On December 4, 2006, the U.S. Supreme Court heard two K - 12 cases involving the use of race in deciding school assignments. The high court heard appeals from a Seattle parents group and a Kentucky parent. Both appellants claim public schools implemented programs to achieve racial diversity that unjustly discriminated when selecting students for acceptance.

#### *Issue #2: Inclusion of Special Education Students in Mainstream Classrooms*

Multiple forces such as legal and legislative mandates drive the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms. One reason is the disproportionate placement of Blacks in segregated special education classrooms nationwide, as well as Hispanic students who are taken out of mainstream classes and placed into special education classes in certain states (USDOE: Office for Civil Rights, 1997). Historically, Reid and Knight (2006) argue that the disproportionality problem in k-12 special education can be traced to the intersection of disability and other identity factors with the ideology of normalcy and the dominant medical model approach to special education.

### **Implications**

This issues represent the complexities of the diverse notions of social justice. They both offer many points of entry into the process of problematizing social justice. The first issue concerns using race as a factor in school plans. Currently, in both Louisville, KY and Seattle, WA, students are offered a choice of schools but can be denied admission based on their race if their enrollment at a particular school would upset the pre-established racial balance of that school. In both cases, the issue is denial of entry into school based on race. The question for the Supreme Court justices is whether measures designed to achieve or maintain racial integration should be subjected to the same scrutiny as measures that were put into place after *Brown vs. Board of Education* to end segregation. In other words, in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court ruled that students cannot be denied entry into school because of race. The social justice issue in that case was one of equity, in which the Supreme Court ruling addressed an injustice suffered by an oppressed class. In the current cases, the plaintiffs are framing the social justice issue as one of equality – they think that entry into their local school should be regardless of race. In *Brown vs. Board of Education* and the current cases, a plaintiff advocates for not being excluded from school on the basis of race. Yet, those arguments in *Brown vs. Board of Education* and those arguing in the current cases are *polar opposites* in their perspectives of what constitutes social justice.

The second issue focuses on the policies and practices of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom. This issue, similar to the first, is rife with arguments that appear to be polar opposites—perhaps the hallmarks of what critical pedagogy

theory refers to as *conscientization* (Freire, 1990). For example, Smith (2004) refers to the multiple histories of special education and researchers in the area of the sociology of disability who document how meaning is ascribed to individuals through labeling and stereotyping and how all aspects of a culture pervade its treatment of individuals with disabilities. This has led to a general dissatisfaction with the way that special education has been conceptualised, how research and service delivery are conducted, and how results often pathologize and further their exclusion and their marginal identities. In fact, some people with disabilities, in their role as self-advocates, say, “*Nothing about us without us!*” In contrast, inclusive education offers a process that sets up a sense of belonging for all children and youth with differences. In a critical analysis of the discourses of inclusion, Dyson (1999) categorized the discourses as either justification (reasons for an inclusive educational system) or implementation (ways to carry out an inclusive model). Artiles, Harris-Murri, and Rostenberg (2006) point out that the justification discourse, based on a *rights and ethics* discourse, critiques the dual educational system as a barrier to systemic changes that would make education responsive to an increasingly diverse society and privileges professional groups who resist inclusion efforts. In comparison, an *efficacy* discourse critiques segregated models on the grounds of its failure to promote student learning while the implementation discourse, built on the *political* discourse, argues that political actions must address inequitable conditions. Finally, a *pragmatic* discourse focuses on the classroom practices that provide effective instruction (e.g., Skrtic, 1991). Polar opposites such as represented by the multiple discourses must be openly discussed in order to gain a democratic resolution which leads to the query, “*Can a democracy exist in the absence of social justice?*”

In conclusion, regardless of which moral stance teacher educators choose, we contend that it is wrong to remove the term social justice from the NCATE glossary of terms that serve as examples of dispositions for teacher educators. In fact, even if the term never reappears, the concepts and mission statements of those teacher education programs and teachers who have graduated are likely to keep the social justice issue at the forefront of their work. They believe, as do we, that it is imperative to advance the multiple discourses of social justice so that both teacher education faculty and prospective teachers learn to grapple with the complexity of social justice because, as an issue, social justice discourse is emblematic of democratic discourse.

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