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Critiquing the Critiques

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As discussant for a recent American Educational Research Association (AERA) symposium on assessing teacher education, Tom Lasley (2007), Dean of the School of Education at the University of Dayton, commented that all too often, teacher educators make sure teacher candidates know things like Jonathan Kozol’s (1991) analysis of the “savage inequalities” among America’s rich and poor schools, but don’t make sure they know how to teach kids to read. In a commentary for the alumni newsletter of the School of Education at Stanford University, Lee Shulman (2005), President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, called for a consistent professional approach to teacher education based on deep preparation in the content areas and the practice of teaching and rigorous assessment of teaching outcomes. In conclusion, he wrote, “Commitment to social justice is insufficient; love is not enough” (¶ 5).

Both Lasley and Shulman are insiders in the teacher education community with distinguished histories in the field. It is precisely their insider status, however, that makes their comments both so important and so excoriating. They reflect the critique made by some people inside the community and many people outside it: teacher education for social justice centers on kids feeling good and teachers being politically correct, while nobody pays attention to learning. Within the current political climate—where neoliberal, market-based analyses of education have become “common sense” (Apple, 2006, p.15), and where accountability has shifted from resources to bottom line outcomes (Cuban, 2004)—this critique of teacher education for social justice is particularly damning.

In this chapter, we analyze four overlapping, but distinguishable, critiques of teacher education for social justice that are prevalent in the discourse: the ambiguity critique, the knowledge critique, the ideology critique, and the free speech critique. The chapter begins with discussion of the ambiguity critique, which sometimes stands alone, but is often a preface to other criticisms of social justice in teacher education. Then we take up the other three major critiques, explicating core ideas and assumptions and identifying the major players in the debates. Finally we re-examine these three critiques, blending our rejoinders with analysis of the larger agendas to which they are attached. We argue that although the critiques claim to be apolitical and value-free, they are, in fact, neither. Rather, many of the critiques of teacher education for social justice are part of a larger political ideology based on a narrow view of learning, an individualistic notion of freedom, and a market-based perspective on education that substitutes accountability for democracy. What most of the critics want is not a value-free teacher education, but one that matches their values, not an apolitical teacher education, but one with a more hegemonic and therefore invisible politics.
Teacher Education for Social Justice and the Ambiguity Critique

The idea of preparing teachers to teach for social justice is prevalent in a collection of teacher preparation programs and other initiatives in the United States and elsewhere. Local efforts have been loosely linked through national organizations such as the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME), the Urban Network to Improve Teacher Education (UNITE),1 and several committees and special interest groups of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and the American Education Research Association (AERA). Institutional efforts have been encouraged by AACTE, which promoted attention to diversity in teacher education in the early 1970s, and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), which incorporated preparing teachers for diversity in its 1976 standards and included social justice as a desirable professional disposition in its 2000 standards.

Despite national attention, however, there is considerable variation in meanings of the term teacher education for social justice. Some programs with this label emphasize teachers’ and students’ cultural and ethnic identity, teaching prospective teachers how to provide culturally appropriate curriculum and pedagogy and how to build social supports for the learning of all students. Others focus on teachers’ and students’ activism regarding the social, economic, and institutional structures that maintain unearned privilege and disadvantage for particular racial, cultural, language, socioeconomic, and gender groups. Some programs that use the language of social justice emphasize civic education, focusing on teaching teachers how to prepare the future participants of a democratic society to deliberate, disagree and act in ways that are socially responsible. Some programs feature innovative community-based sites where teachers learn alongside community activists and parents, while others focus primarily on changing the curriculum within traditional university programs.

Many teacher education programs that take the social justice label emphasize some combination of the above and other ideas about how teaching is related to justice, diversity, access to learning opportunities, the distribution of social and economic resources, and the tensions in civil societies between self interest and the common good. However, the application of this language to disparate projects and programs, coupled with the absence of a fully developed definition or theory, has been a source of sharp criticism, which we refer to here as the ambiguity critique. This critique holds that teacher education for social justice is an ambiguous and vague slogan with multiple instantiations, no clear and consistent professional definition, and inadequate theoretical grounding. Interestingly, this critique has been made by both advocates and opponents of teacher education for social justice. Introducing a review of the meanings of social justice in education, for example, North (2006) asserted:

[T]he label “social justice” is appearing throughout the field—in teacher education program discourses and policies, teacher-activist organization statements..., educational conference programs, and scholarly articles and books. Unfortunately, educators, educational researchers, and educational policymakers frequently employ this catchphrase without offering an explanation of its social, cultural, economic, and political significance. (p. 507)

Along similar lines, Grant and Agosto (2008) have argued that attention to social justice has increased over the past two decades “more in name than substance,” and Zeichner (2006) asserted it was “difficult to find a teacher education program in the United States that [did] not claim to have a program that prepares teachers for social justice” (p.
328). These quotations represent the “anything and everything” version of the ambiguity critique, which emphasizes that the notion of social justice is undertheorized and the field lacks shared definitions. In addition, from this perspective, teacher educators only occasionally acknowledge the philosophical and historical roots of the notion of teaching for social justice, which increases the likelihood that it will be diluted, trivialized, or co-opted. Although we are advocates of teacher education for social justice, we must admit we agree with the “anything and everything” version of the ambiguity critique; it is rightly intended to push the field forward by demanding clarity, consistency, and incisiveness.

Strong opponents of teacher education for social justice also use the ambiguity critique. However, for some of the staunchest critics, although ambiguity is ostensibly an issue, it is actually nearly always either a cover for, or a prelude to, larger critiques of schooling, politics, and ideology. For example, in the debate about NCATE’s inclusion of social justice as a desired disposition for teachers (discussed below), the National Association of Scholars (NAS) challenged the “constitutional propriety” of social justice as an accreditation criterion because of its lack of a definitive meaning, or what they termed its “contested ideological significance” (Balch, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE; 2005) challenged social justice as a required disposition for teacher candidates, referring to it as “an entirely abstract concept…that can represent vastly different things to different people” (¶ 3). In these cases, as we show below, the real issue was not ambiguity, but the particular politics and the larger social movements to which social justice was attached.

Teacher Education for Social Justice: The Knowledge Critique

The knowledge critique, which focuses on the content and purposes of teacher education for social justice, is the most prominent of the current critiques and has, arguably, both the deepest roots and the sharpest teeth. In the context of the current accountability movement, where high stakes test results are broadly accepted as the final arbiter in debates about teacher preparation and teacher quality, the knowledge critique is particularly deadly.

In a nutshell, the knowledge critique holds that teacher education for social justice is about teachers being nice, children feeling good, and everybody blissfully ignoring knowledge. Citing Heather MacDonald’s (1998) article, “Why Johnny’s Teacher Can’t Teach,” which was broadly circulated in the Manhattan Institute’s City Journal, Newsweek columnist George Will (2006) commented on the then-emerging controversy prompted by NCATE’s inclusion of social justice in its list of desirable teacher dispositions. He said:

Today’s teacher education focus on “professional disposition” is just the latest permutation of what MacDonald calls the education schools’ “immutable dogma,” which she calls “Anything but Knowledge.” The dogma has been that primary and secondary education is about “self-actualization” or “finding one’s joy” or “social adjustment” or “multicultural sensitivity” or “minority empowerment” But is never about anything as banal as mere knowledge. (p. 98)

Throughout the column, Will hammered home the chasm between social justice and knowledge: he juxtaposed teacher education’s stated commitment to preparing individuals “to promote social justice” with what he asserted was almost never the commitment in education schools—preparing individuals “to read, write and reason.” He characterized the education school curriculum in terms of its “vacuity,” its “progressive political
catechism,” and as “today’s progressive patois,” in contrast to “rigorous pedagogy,” attention to “accomplishments measured by tests,” and “teacher-centered classrooms where knowledge is everything” (p. 98). In short, although George Will is certainly not the major foe of teacher education for social justice, his column succeeded in bringing the critique to the Newsweek national readership. Below we look beneath the surface of the knowledge critique by identifying its major arguments and assumptions.

**Major Arguments in the Knowledge Critique**

The knowledge critique is based on two arguments about teacher education for social justice, one the mirror image of the other: (1) Teacher education programs with social justice goals place far too much emphasis on progressive and political educational goals, particularly respecting pupils’ cultural identity and bolstering their self-esteem, on one hand, and promoting equity and social change, on the other. (2) At the same time, teacher education programs with social justice goals place far too little emphasis on traditional educational goals directly related to conveying subject matter knowledge and basic skills. From this perspective, the first of teacher education’s failings—its progressive focus—is the cause of its second—lack of attention to basic knowledge and skills.

The first argument is an old one and is consistent with the positions of many conservative critics of progressive education. From this perspective, multicultural curriculum, culturally appropriate pedagogy, and the like, which are core aspects of teaching for social justice, are regarded as condescending, divisive, and anti-intellectual. Likewise, cultural critiques of school knowledge are regarded as mere political correctness, which are soft on substance and rigor. These aspects of teacher education for social justice are often wrapped up in one package by the critics and labeled as helping students “feel good about their racial or ethnic identity” (Ravitch, 2001, p. 426) or as mere “therapy” (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997, p. 373).

From this perspective, teacher education programs for social justice inappropriately characterize teaching as a political activity and emphasize that teachers should be part of larger social movements. From this perspective, historical critiques of the education system as a reproducer of social and economic inequities are regarded as unsubstantiated and misguided. Nowhere is this application of the knowledge critique more visible than in the last decade’s attacks on social studies education. The Fordham Foundation’s monograph, *Passion Without Progress* (Leming, Ellington, & Porter-Magee, 2003), for example, reflected the decade’s conservative analysis of “what went wrong with the social studies,” as suggested in Chester Finn’s (2003) foreword:

Why is social studies education in such deep trouble?...one reason is the dominant belief systems of the social studies education professoriate who train future teachers in colleges and departments of education....The theorists’ passion for radical social change and their propensity to use the public schools as a tool to do so, is undoubtedly one reason social studies is in crisis. It has resulted in a field that eschews substantive content and subordinates a focus on effective practice to educational and political correctness. (pp. i–ii)

This quotation illustrates both arguments of the knowledge critique, suggesting that teacher education’s wrong-headed goals preclude their ensuring that teacher candidates can transmit important knowledge and skills.

Leming, Ellington, and Porter-Magee (2003) referred to this as “the kinds of basic knowledge ordinary Americans think important for their children to learn” and “tradi-
tional history and social science content” (p. ii). Likewise, in her excoriating explanation of why teachers can’t teach, Heather MacDonald (1998) called this “plain old knowledge” (p. 14), sarcastically pointing out that the “Anything But Knowledge” credo leaves education professors and their acolytes free to concentrate on “far more pressing matters than how to teach the facts of history or the rules of sentence construction” (p. 18). Ravitch’s (2001) argument that the culprit in the 20th century’s failed school reforms was progressive education is also helpful here. She contrasted initiatives that challenged the idea of a canon of agreed-upon knowledge that all citizens should have (e.g., constructivism, multiculturalism, and the self-esteem movement) with reform proposals like E. D. Hirsch’s “cultural literacy” (Hirsch, 1987).

Assumptions Underlying the Knowledge Critique

A number of closely related assumptions underlie the major arguments of the knowledge critique. First, and perhaps most important, is the assumption that contemporary versions of teacher education for social justice are part of the long lineage of American progressive education, which historically has been anti-knowledge, anti-intellectual, and yoked to the idea that education can promote social and political change. Second is the assumption that there is an utter dichotomy between justice and knowledge. Simply put, this means that if teacher preparation programs are promoting social justice, then they are not promoting pupils’ learning of academic knowledge and skills, which is the rightful and major purpose of schooling in society.

Most of the knowledge critiques of teacher education for social justice rely on both of these assumptions, which are usually entangled rather than discrete. Crowe’s (2008) commentary on accountability and teacher education illustrates:

As a substitute for empirically-based and scientifically-acceptable knowledge, the set of values loosely coupled into “social justice” may be best understood as the latest manifestation of “pedagogical romanticism” (Sedlak, in press) to beset the field. And the connection between these values and student learning is unclear...NCATE’s “dispositions” give great emphasis to teacher attitudes and self-efficacy concepts that have no empirically demonstrable bearing on whether students in the classroom are learning anything that can be measured objectively...

The endless argument about the “moral basis of education” undercuts claims of legitimacy and professional status.... The academy may revel in discussions about knowledge and truth and morality, but schools and policy leaders have real world problems to solve. (p. 992)

In this commentary, Crowe connected teacher education for social justice with beliefs, values, romanticism, self-efficacy, and morality. On the other hand, he contrasted teacher education for social justice with empirically based and scientifically acceptable knowledge, student learning, learning that can be measured objectively, legitimacy, professional status, and solving problems in the real world. In doing so, Crowe linked teacher education for social justice to previous romantic and progressive reforms at the same time he decoupled it from contemporary emphases on scientifically based research and evidence-based education. In doing so, he divorced social justice from knowledge, emphasizing instead their mutual exclusivity.

The quotations in this section reveal a number of somewhat different ideas that are usually rolled into the presumed dichotomy between justice and knowledge in teacher education: Unimportant information and activities monopolize the teacher education
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Curriculum so there is no time or space for attention to subject matter knowledge. Teaching and teacher education for social justice, by definition, focuses on something other than academic subject matter and high standards, which is trivial and limited in intellectual substance. And, perhaps most important, “true” knowledge—the kind that ought to be the centerpiece of schooling and the kind that is testable on standardized tests—is objective and apolitical and thus cannot be coupled with, taught at the same time as, or in conjunction with, the overtly political knowledge that promotes activism and social justice. In short, from the perspective of the knowledge critique, teacher education for social justice does not, does not want to, and could not even if it wanted to, promote pupils’ learning of subject matter knowledge and skills.

Teacher Education for Social Justice: The Ideology Critique

The ideology critique of teacher education for social justice is closely related to the knowledge critique in that it makes many of the same assumptions about the neutrality and the apolitical nature of academic knowledge and about the knowledge transmission role of the school. It is different, however, in that rather than focusing on the content and purposes of teacher education, the ideology critique focuses on the criteria and standards according to which prospective teachers are admitted into or barred from entering the profession.

In short, the ideology critique holds that evaluating prospective teachers on the basis of moral values, political perspectives, and certain dispositions, such as social justice, is a blatant misuse of the gate-keeping powers of professional accreditors. Although the ideology critique both pre- and postdates the NCATE dispositions controversy, it gained prominence when NCATE’s (2001) inclusion of social justice as an example of a desirable disposition in teacher candidates became a flashpoint in contentious debates about how teachers should be assessed and who should decide whether they were admitted to the profession.

Backed by national conservative organizations, students at a number of colleges and universities complained that in order to be recommended for teaching certification, they had to have certain ideological beliefs. In December 2005, the Chronicle of Higher Education ran a story (Wilson, 2005), with the headline, “We Don’t Need That Kind of Attitude,” and the subhead, “Education Schools Want to Make Sure Prospective Teachers Have the Right ‘Disposition’” (p. A8). The article described a number of instances, like this one first reported in the New York Sun (Gershman, 2005):

Brooklyn College’s School of Education has begun to base evaluations of aspiring teachers in part on their commitment to social justice, raising fears that the college is screening students for their political views… teacher candidates could be ousted from the School of Education if they are found to have the wrong dispositions. (p. 1)

The Chronicle article also reported that some teacher education institutions had developed ways to assess the dispositions of teacher candidates and that there were grievances regarding these criteria pending at some institutions.

Major Arguments in the Ideology Critique

Two major arguments, closely tied to one another and almost always made in tandem, comprise the ideology critique: (1) Moral values, beliefs, and political ideologies vary according to the worldviews and traditions of families, communities, and religious and
other groups; these values and ideologies are dynamic and contested rather than consen-
sual in our society. (2) Institutions that prepare professionals and the accrediting agen-
cies that monitor them are gatekeepers to the professions; they should judge candidates
on their knowledge and performance as professionals, not on their politics, personality
traits, or ideological perspectives. From this perspective, evaluating potential teachers on
their dispositions for social justice is tantamount to controlling entry into the profession
on the basis of partisan and controversial ideological positions rather than according to
what is rightfully the business of teacher certification and accreditation—ensuring that
only persons who can effectively convey academic knowledge to pupils are admitted into
the profession.

The first argument here is deceptively straightforward—if and when the enterprise
of teacher certification/accreditation focuses on beliefs, moral values, or dispositions, it
becomes inappropriately political and ideological. Once this premise is accepted, the sec-
ond follows easily and logically: the teacher certification/accreditation enterprise should
be based on the assessment of potential teachers’ knowledge and skills, not on their
politics or ideology. The 2000 NCATE standards and the ensuing efforts of NCATE-
accredited institutions to develop assessment tools to evaluate candidates’ dispositions
flew in the face of both the first and the second of these arguments and gave organizations
and individuals already opposed to the social justice agenda the opportunity to challenge
NCATE’s gate-keeping criteria.

For example, in November 2005, the National Association of Scholars (NAS), an orga-
nization long opposed to social justice agendas, filed a formal letter with the U.S. Depart-
ment of Education’s Assistant Secretary for Post-Secondary Education. NAS requested
that the DOE inquire into the “educational and constitutional propriety of the accredita-
tion criteria used by NCATE,” in particular challenging its reference to social justice,
which, as noted above, they asserted was a term “necessarily fraught with contested
ideological significance” (Balch, 2005, p. 1). In the same letter, NAS challenged the pro-
fessional standards of a school of social work, based on the statement of the school that
a purpose of social work education was “preparing social workers to alleviate poverty,
oppression, and other forms of social injustice,” an assumption NAS decried as “progres-
sive political activism” (Balch, 2005, p. 3).

Some months later and following intense political pressure and media attention,
NCATE withdrew the language of social justice from its standards. It is worth noting
that although much of the NCATE debate seemed on the surface to be about the issue
of professional dispositions, the fact is that the notion that good teaching is supported
by certain “dispositions” was not invented with NCATE’s 2000 performance standards
(Wise, 2006). Rather this was consistent with other widely used teaching standards,
which had not created any uproar. It is also worth noting that no public debate ensued
about teacher candidates’ dispositions toward caring, fairness, or honesty, which were
the qualities in addition to social justice that had been listed as examples in NCATE’s
glossary entry for the term disposition. There is little doubt that it was social justice—
rather than debate about whether dispositions should be a criterion for admitting teach-
 ers into the profession—that incited the critics.

The ideology critique is primarily about teacher education’s accountability processes.
Unlike the knowledge critique, which focuses on the content of the curriculum, the ideol-
ogy critique zeroes in on certification and accreditation, in particular, the professional
standards according to which potential teachers are judged fit to enter the field. The
ideology critique, at least as it played out around NCATE’s dispositions, held that the
accreditation standards were unduly political.
Assumptions Underlying the Ideology Critique

Many of the assumptions that underlie the knowledge critique—assumptions about the neutrality and objectivity of core academic knowledge and the knowledge transmission purpose of schooling—also underlie the ideology critique. We do not rehash these here except to note that they apply. The central assumption animating the ideology critique, however, is that professional accreditation—and thus professional education—can be and ought to be apolitical, value-free, and neutral when it comes to moral and ethical issues. This presumes, of course, that there is a choice in education—as in all social institutions—between politics and no politics and that it is possible to engage in practice and policymaking in teacher preparation, certification, and program accreditation without being political.

The ideology critique works from the assumption that candidates ought to be selected for the teaching profession on grounds that are neither political nor ideological. In a commentary on the politics of teacher education, for example, Frederick Hess (2005), Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, expressed great concern that “leading voices in teacher preparation…had unapologetically argued that teacher education is inescapably about championing certain values” (p. 195).

From Hess’s perspective, the problem was not only that teacher education’s leaders linked values and ideology to teacher education, but also that they asserted that this was unavoidable. Hess rejected a teacher education system where the viewpoints and values of “the establishment” were allowed to govern who is permitted to teach. In contrast, Hess favored the “common sense” approach of deregulation, which opens up entry into teaching to many more would-be teachers and lets the market decide who should teach with pupils’ test scores the ultimate arbiter of success. Hess’s commentary illustrates that although the ideology critique ostensibly focuses on the gate-keeping function of teacher certification and accreditation, this critique is also linked to larger political agendas that favor market-based reforms of teacher education and neoliberal perspectives on the connection between education institutions and the economy.

Teacher Education for Social Justice: The Free Speech Critique

The third major critique of teacher education for social justice is the free speech critique, which focuses on the intellectual climate and civic environment of colleges and universities where teachers are prepared. Although it zeroes in on institutional climate rather than accountability criteria, the free speech critique shares many of the arguments and assumptions of the ideology critique. Like the ideology critique, the free speech critique became prominent in the teacher education discourse at about the same time that the NCATE dispositions controversy erupted. Neither the ideology critique nor the free speech critique, however, was simply a response to NCATE’s inclusion of social justice language in its standards. Rather both of these critiques emerged as part of mounting concern among neoconservatives that universities, which they alleged had privileged liberal perspectives for years, had become so liberal that they were ostracizing students with conservative viewpoints and attempting to indoctrinate everybody into one orthodox—and liberal—viewpoint.

Simply put, the free speech critique holds that teacher education programs that promote social justice circumscribe teacher candidates’ freedom to think and say whatever they wish and to adhere to whatever moral principles they choose. This critique has been promulgated by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) (2007) and other groups whose purpose is to “defend and sustain individual rights at America’s
colleges and universities...and educate the public and concerned Americans about the threats to these rights on our campuses and about the means to preserve them” (¶ 1).

**Major Arguments in the Free Speech Critique**

The free speech critique of teacher education for social justice is comprised of two closely related arguments: (1) Teacher education courses or programs with social justice standards, requirements, assignments, curricula, or assessments amount to a political litmus test for would-be teachers and thus circumscribe their first amendment rights to hold whatever beliefs and moral principles they choose. (2) Promoting social justice in teacher education is anathema to the mission and traditions of the modern university, which is intended to foster an open intellectual atmosphere of free thought and speech.

The free speech critique puts these two arguments together, concluding that colleges and universities cannot simultaneously make social justice a central part of a professional program and, at the same time, foster the appropriate educational environment. An editorial in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, written by Greg Lukianoff (2007), the President of FIRE, illustrates:

> At the heart of the modern liberal university is an ideal simultaneously grand and humble: None of us are omniscient, none can know what strange paths can lead to wisdom and understanding, and it is arrogant for any institution to assume the role of final arbiter of truth. Official orthodoxies impede rather than facilitate education and lead to dogma rather than living, organic ideas. One would hope that we are long past the time when education was viewed as an opportunity to inculcate “correct” and unchallengeable answers to philosophical, moral, and societal questions. (p. B8)

Lukianoff cited incidents from education and other professions, such as social work and law, where FIRE had supported students’ efforts to file suit or bring grievances about social justice programs. He described teacher education for social justice as part of larger trends at universities to establish “mandatory political orthodoxy,” to promote “dogma,” and to promulgate “enforced conformity of thought.” He juxtaposed these with the ideals he claimed should be at the heart of the university—“living, organic ideas,” “liberal education,” and “freedom” (p. B8). Lukianoff concluded that teacher education programs committed to social justice unavoidably infringed on students’ civil rights and threatened the open intellectual atmosphere that is central to the university community.

Those who use the free speech critique regard teacher education for social justice as a process that compromises the intellectual freedom that is at the heart of civil society. Along similar lines, in a *U.S. News & World Report* column entitled, “Classroom Warriors,” John Leo (2005) suggested that by focusing on social justice, the “cultural left” of education schools, was enforcing “political conformity” and imposing “groupthink” with dire consequences for both students and faculty:

> [T]he ed schools, essentially a liberal monoculture...require support for diversity and a culturally left agenda, including opposition to what the schools sometimes call “institutional racism, classism, and heterosexism.” Predictably, some students concluded that thought control would make classroom dissent dangerous.... Five students filed written complaints and received no formal reply from the college. One was told to leave the school and take an equivalent course at a community college. Two
of the complaining students were then accused of plagiarism and marked down one letter grade....

K. C. Johnson, a history professor at the school who defended the dissenting students, became a target himself. After writing an article in Inside Higher Ed attacking dispositions theory as a form of mind control, Johnson faced a possible investigation by a faculty Integrity Committee. (p. 75)

Leo characterized FIRE as the legal champion in situations where the free speech rights of students and faculty were threatened. From this perspective, the university is a microcosm of larger society—both depend for their life’s blood on the open exchange of ideas where disagreement and deliberation are encouraged, and orthodoxy is properly regarded as dangerous.

Assumptions Underlying the Free Speech Critique

There are two major assumptions underlying the free speech critique. The first is that teacher preparation courses and programs can and ought to be apolitical and, when it comes to morals and values, broadly ecumenical rather than parochial. Because this assumption is similar to one underlying the ideology critique, we do not elaborate further here. Second, the free speech critique assumes that universities are currently dominated by liberal—and in some cases, radical—faculty members whose views are privileged and who threaten the intellectual freedom of faculty and students with different ideas. Here, freedom is defined as an individual’s right to express his or her own ideas freely and without fear coupled with freedom from exposure to particular ideas.

The free speech critique of teacher education for social justice underscores the perceived mounting disparity between liberal academics, on one hand, and a growing population of conservative college students and a relatively smaller number of conservative faculty, on the other. This critique is part of much larger efforts by conservative groups nationwide to ensure that universities—and in some cases K–12 schools—refrain from advocating particular views on issues that are deemed partisan or give “equal time” to opposing viewpoints. Along these lines, for example, a number of state legislatures are considering new “academic freedom” or “academic bill of rights” legislation. The American Federation of Teachers “Academic Freedom Forum” (2007) recently opened an article with this provocative example:

The Arizona state legislature is considering a bill that could levy a $500 fine on professors who advocate “one side of a social, political or cultural issue that is a matter of partisan controversy,” the Arizona Daily Star reports. K-12 teachers could face three hours of re-education or the loss of their teaching certificate for doing the same. (¶ 1)

The article reported that bills of this type were also being considered in Kentucky, West Virginia, Georgia, and New York, and in some places, like Virginia, legislators had even sponsored bills proposing that colleges and universities be required to prove they had “intellectual diversity” or “ideological balance” on campus (¶ 3). (Virginia’s bill, which was criticized by opponents as having more to do with forwarding conservative viewpoints than promoting a true exchange of ideas, was subsequently rejected.)

The free speech critique of teacher education assumes that when teacher education programs have social justice in their standards, requirements, assignments, curricula, or assessments, this is tantamount to a mandatory “honor code” or “loyalty oath,” which
is inconsistent with the open intellectual atmosphere that is integral to universities. This amounts to indoctrination, limits individual freedom, and compromises the university as an open intellectual environment. From this perspective, critics want to ensure that college students have the right to express opinions that differ from those of their professors and supervisors as well as freedom from exposure to certain ideas about social justice that are considered partisan and ideological.

Conclusion: Reexamining the Critiques/Reframing Social Justice

As we have shown, the critiques of teacher education for social justice are overlapping but distinguishable. The knowledge critique targets content and purpose, the ideology critique aims at gate-keeping, and the free speech critique focuses on intellectual climate. Although these critiques are not the same, they are consistent and are often blended together. Further, each is sometimes introduced by the ambiguity critique, which holds that social justice is a fuzzy term, leaving it open to contested ideological and political interpretations. It is important to note that these critiques are not purveyed by the lunatic fringe of academia or by peripheral cultural groups. Rather they represent powerful—and increasingly widespread—arguments about teacher preparation, the educational environments that support learning, and the purposes of schooling in a democratic society. Although we are strong supporters of teacher education for social justice, we also think the critiques should be taken seriously. Because space limitations prevent us from thoroughly rejoining each argument we have identified, we conclude with cross-cutting points that reexamine the critiques and reframe our ways of thinking about teacher education for social justice.

Teacher Education for Social Justice and Learning

The alleged dichotomy between teacher education programs focused on social justice and programs focused on knowledge is the crux of some of the most damning critiques. Stated in its starkest terms, this implies that there is a choice about the goal of teacher education: either knowledge and learning or social justice. From the perspective of this dichotomy, then, social justice by definition precludes knowledge and learning. But this conclusion turns on a classic rhetorical move on the part of the critics—creating a Hobson’s choice between “knowledge” and “little or no knowledge”—since no reasonable person would choose a teacher education program not dedicated to knowledge and improving pupils’ learning. As political scientist Deborah Stone (2002) points out, a Hobson’s choice wears “all the verbal clothing of a real choice, when in fact the very list of options determines how people will choose by making one option seem like the only reasonable possibility” (p. 246).

As teacher educators, we must expose the fact that the choice between knowledge and social justice is artificial and based on an utterly false dichotomy. On the other hand, we must also take a hard look at ourselves and our programs to ensure that teacher education for social justice really does have at its heart an explicit focus on pupils’ learning and their life chances. But the notions of “learning” and “knowledge” central to teacher education for social justice are different from, and bigger than, the notions implicit in the critiques. From the perspective of social justice, promoting pupils’ learning includes teaching much of the traditional canon, but it also includes teaching pupils to think critically about and challenge the universality of that knowledge. Along similar lines, we must be sure that teacher education for social justice focuses on accountability (e.g., evidence-based strategies, testing, using data to improve practice) while, at the same time,
it critiques narrow understandings of “education science” and challenges the current testing regime, which constricts the curriculum, deprofessionalizes teaching, and leaves behind the same children as always.

This point must be loud and clear: teacher education programs with the goal of social justice do not give short shrift to teachers’ subject matter knowledge nor do they fail to accept accountability for pupils’ learning. Social justice programs do not do one or the other of these things; they concentrate on knowledge and accountability and they critique their embedded inequities. In contrast to the criticism noted in this chapter’s opening lines, we must make it crystal clear that when teacher education programs focus on social justice, teacher candidates know how to teach kids to read, and they also know that the inequities of schooling and society make it much easier for some groups of kids to learn to read than others. Knowledge and justice are not dichotomous, but complementary, goals. In fact, many would suggest that attention to social critique and to improving society motivates students and stimulates knowledge acquisition. This means that it is not only the case that both social critique and subject matter knowledge can be taught, but also that pursuing the former can often further the goals of the latter.

**Teacher Education for Social Justice and Freedom**

As we have shown, critics make the argument that teacher education for social justice is tantamount to an ideological litmus test for teacher candidates that curtails their intellectual freedom and interferes with the open atmosphere of the universities they attend. Unchallenged, this is as deadly a critique of teacher education for social justice as is the claim that it eschews knowledge.

Characterizing teacher education for social justice as infringement on individual freedom is a powerful strategy, since freedom is among the rights Americans hold most dear. As Stone (2002) reminds us, however, freedom itself is a contested and continuously constructed concept, not a given. The critiques presume that freedom is upholding the rights of individuals to adhere to whatever beliefs and values they wish concerning education and schooling. Embedded in the idea of teacher education for social justice, on the other hand, is the presupposition that teaching is a profession with certain inalienable purposes, among them challenging the inequities in access and opportunity that curtail the freedom of some individuals and some groups to obtain a high quality education. With the former, freedom is defined as the prevention of outside interference with the ideas of individuals. From this perspective, which is fundamental to the critiques, it follows that teacher candidates should not only have freedom to express their own views, but also freedom from exposure to ideas about education with which they do not agree and from definitions of teaching that are inconsistent with their views. When teaching is conceptualized as challenging educational inequities so that everybody has rich learning opportunities, however, freedom is defined in a way that links individual freedom with social responsibility. From this perspective, freedom is the removal of those social, economic, and institutional barriers that are within the scope of human agency and that constrain individuals’ or groups’ access to educational opportunities and resources.

To respond to the critics, we must again be loud and clear. Contrary to the claim that teacher education for social justice limits freedom, the goal of teaching for social justice is indeed freedom—not the sort of freedom that protects individuals from certain ideas, but the freedom that unites the efforts of individual teachers with broader educational goals related to the common good. From this perspective, teaching is rightfully defined as helping to alleviate the inequities that curtail the freedom of all participants in our society to gain a quality education. This goal is integral to the very idea of learning to
teach. In short, something like the sentiments regarding the preservation of human life in modern day versions of the Hippocratic Oath to which prospective doctors in nearly all medical schools ascribe, teaching for social justice is not an option, but a crucial and fundamental part of teaching.

**Behind the Critiques of Teacher Education for Social Justice**

As we have shown throughout this chapter, although they explicitly claim to be apolitical and “unideological,” the viewpoints underlying all three of the major critiques of teacher education for social justice are in fact part of a larger political ideology. Michael Apple (2006) refers to this as the “rightward turn” in educational policy. He argues that this has come about through the “successful struggle by the right to form a broad-based alliance,” which has won “the battle over common sense” (p. 31). Apple explains that:

[This new alliance] has creatively stitched together different social tendencies and commitments and has organized them under its own general leadership in issues dealing with social welfare, culture, the economy, and...education.... [T]his alliance contains four major elements...sutured into the more general conservative movement. These elements include neoliberals, neoconservatives, authoritarian populists, and a particular fraction of the upwardly mobile professional and managerial new middle class. (p. 31)

Apple argues that the first two of these groups, especially the neoliberals, are the leaders of the conservative alliance and their efforts to “reform” education.

Applying Apple’s analysis to the critiques of teacher education for social justice, we can see that the knowledge critique couples the neoconservative desire to return to the traditional knowledge and discipline of the canon with the neoliberal insistence on market-based education reforms that encourage private enterprise and consumer choice and make test score accountability the bottom line. Both the ideology and free speech critiques presuppose the neoliberal view of freedom as individual choice. The ideology critique links this perspective to the neoliberal disdain for regulation by characterizing teacher education certification, accreditation, and licensure as unproven policies and unnecessary roadblocks to improving teacher quality. The free speech critique links this perspective to the neoconservative characterization of the modern university as a hotbed of liberal, if not radical, perspectives that are anti-American, anti-White, and anticonservative. All three of these critiques skillfully use the rhetorical strategy Stone (2002) calls “the story of decline” (p. 138) to persuade the audience that if something is not done to change the situation (here, the proliferation of teacher education programs with social justice goals), our system of producing teachers for the nation’s schools will continue to deteriorate.

In short, although they claim otherwise, the critiques of teacher education for social justice are very political and ideological. From the perspective of the critiques, the ultimate freedom is the freedom of the market, and democracy is narrowly defined in terms of market-based, bottom-line accountability coupled with the deregulation of schools, teacher preparation routes, and other educational services. From the perspective of social justice, however, freedom couples individuals’ rights with social responsibility for the public good that ensures that everybody has freedom of access to rich opportunities to learn and to the resources that make that possible.

We are strong supporters of teacher education for social justice. In our judgment, there is no more pressing problem facing the schools—or society in general—than ensuring that all of the nation’s schoolchildren have deep and rich learning opportunities, easy
and truly equitable access to educational resources, and legitimate prospects following K–12 schooling for either further education or employment that pays a living wage. As we noted above, the bottom line of teacher education for social justice must be improving students’ learning and their life chances. To make this happen, we need carefully worked-out theories of teacher education for social justice that take into account the social, historical, and philosophical moorings of the term and carefully apply them to the educational scene. We also believe, however, that critiques of teacher education for social justice must be taken seriously; their powerful arguments about teaching, learning, and schooling must be incisively unpacked, and their links to the dominant political and economic paradigm of neoliberalism must be exposed.

Note

1. UNITE existed as a spin-off or subgroup of the Holmes Partnership, explicitly focused on the preparation of teachers for urban schools, for just over a decade from 1994 to 2003.

References


Will, G. (2006, January 16). Ed schools vs. education: Prospective teachers are expected to have the correct “disposition,” proof of which is espousing “progressive” political beliefs. Newsweek, 98.

