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## **STATES OF SIEGE: The Assault on Education**

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In 73 C.E., having destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple, the Romans marched on Masada where a group of zealots had taken up residence at the fortress built originally by Jonathan, the High Priest, then occupied and refurbished by King Herod who was himself fleeing from Jerusalem. Later, at the outbreak of the Jewish War, a community of Zealots led first by Menachem, and later by his nephew, Eleazar ben Yair, occupied the fortress. Everything we know about Masada derives from Josephus' first century book, *The Jewish War*.

A rock with a very large perimeter and lofty all the way along is broken off on every side by deep ravines. Their bottom is out of sight, and from it rise sheer cliffs on which no animal can get a foothold except in two places where the rock can be climbed, though with difficulty. One of these paths comes from the Dead Sea to the east, the other from the west—an easier route . . . On this the high priest Jonathan first built a fortress and named it Masada: later King Herod devoted great care to the improvement of the place" (Josephus, 1959/1970, 395).

Here, the Romans laid siege in their "very last task in the war against the Jews" (Josephus, 397). Masada seemed unbreachable, but under the direction of General Silva, having found "only one place on which to construct platforms" (Josephus, 1959/1970, 397), the Romans undertook to build a platformed ramp up to the fortress and overtake it. The Jews built a second wall to further protect Masada, but the seemingly illimitable power of the Roman armies and an ill wind which blew the Roman-set fires back on the wooden battlements, portended imminent defeat.

For the Jews occupying Masada, there was no hope. Eleazar, the zealot's leader, "had a clear picture of what the Romans would do to men, women, and children if they won the day; and death seemed to him the right choice for them all" (Josephus, 1959/1970, 398). To all those gathered with him at Masada, Eleazar said: "Hitherto we have never submitted to slavery, even when it brought no danger

with it: we must not choose slavery now, and with it penalties that will mean the end of everything if we fall alive into the hands of the Romans. For we were the first of all to revolt, and shall be the last to break off the struggle. And I think it is God who has given us privilege, that we can die nobly and as free men, unlike others who were unexpectedly defeated. In our case, it is evident that daybreak will end our resistance, but we are free to choose an honourable death with our loved ones. This our enemies cannot prevent, however earnestly they may pray to take us alive; nor can we defeat them in battle” (Josephus, 1959/1970, 398). With that, Eleazar and the entire population of Masada committed suicide. Only two women and five children escaped to tell the tale.

There is another story of another resistance. On April 19, 1943, the Warsaw uprising began when the Germans entered the ghetto to round up the remaining Jews for transport to the Treblinka death camp. Jewish resistance to the Nazi occupation had begun in 1941, but when word of the killing camps, notably Treblinka, filtered back into the ghetto, the people formed the Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (Z.O.B.), headed by Mordecai Anielewicz. In April 19, 1943, the first night of Passover, the Germans issued a call-up for the remaining Jews, and the Z.O.B. and the Żydowski Związek Wojskowy (Ż.Z.W.) began armed resistance. For almost a month, seven hundred and fifty fighters held out against the heavily armed Germans. As had the Romans almost two thousand years earlier, the Germans crushed the resistance. Fifty six-thousand Jews were captured, seven thousand were shot, and the rest were deported to the killing camps.

True, these are harrowing stories; today, when examples of genocide seem to exist all about us, these horrific images might become even clichés. Masada remains for me a troubling tale. Mass suicide as a form of resistance represents a desperate act in a hopeless situation. Was there nothing more to be done? But the alternative—execution and slavery—holds no appeal and offers little hope. Suicide in this case is an act of resistance. From the midst of the Warsaw ghetto, armed resistance against the might of the entire German army was a form of suicide. In both instances, self-destruction seemed better than passive submission. Nonetheless, in both instances, death was the inevitable end.

From my besieged place in academe, I think continually of these forms of resistance. I do not mean to minimize neither the cruelty of the Romans in their subjugation of the Jews in Israel, nor to trivialize the Nazi attempt to annihilate Jewish existence. Both instances, the first imperial and the second genocidal, are final solutions undertaken with extreme prejudice. Nor do I really want to make comparison between professors of education and Jews under siege by the Romans or the Nazis. But I would like with these tropes to offer some sense of the impossible conditions under which teachers in our public schools and schools of education presently exist, and the severely circumscribed possibility of any respite from these conditions in sight. Though teachers in our schools and academies are not threatened with physical obliteration, we are regularly endangered with moral devastation. William F. Pinar argues (2004, 34) that we can hope for little from the public world. “Given our conception by others, we are currently unable, as

individuals or as a group, to undertake radical reform.” Schools of Education are vilified and the professors in them scorned and attacked. Daily I read of my incompetence and that of my colleagues, and daily I am subject to the whims and whimsies of our politicians who would transfer all of their incompetence over to us. If I were to believe even half of what they say about us, I would on most days call in sick, for indeed, that is what they say I am. William Bennett, former Secretary of Education, in a speech in 2000 honoring the Heritage Foundation said that, “In America today, the longer kids stay in school the dumber they get relative to students in other industrialized countries” (Bracey, 2003, 67). I and my colleagues are Bennett’s target. As my grandmother might say, “*Vey iz mir!*” Gerald Bracey writes that “Our schools have been assailed decade after decade . . . [even] many within the field of education have shown minimal support for public schools” (2003, 106). Bracey notes that in 1993, Albert Shanker, the President of the American Federation of Teachers, charged that the Achievement of K-12 students in the United States was poor, that American Students are performing at much lower levels than students in other industrialized nations, and that international exams meant to compare students around the world showed students in the United States at or near the bottom. Though none of these accusations were then or are now true, the assault continues, the walls weakened and the fields overrun. We are a beleaguered population beset upon by hostile forces. We are constantly wrong and in need of correction. I have a clear picture of what these critics would do to men, women, and children if they won the day.

There have been attacks from other quarters as well, some somewhat surprising. For example, in 1985, Henry Giroux and Stanley Aronowitz published *Education Under Siege*. This important work, subtitled “The Conservative, Liberal and Radical Debate Over Schooling,” suggests that what Herbert Kliebard (1987) would soon call the *struggle* for the American curriculum, is, in fact, a siege pursued by the various political factions in American society. I think the argument of this book posits education as some ideal institution existing in the absence of real people. According to Giroux and Aronowitz, this siege of education mounted by forces from across the political spectrum appears to be directed against some monolithic entity called “education.” In this action, each of the various factions—conservative, liberal and radical—marshals its forces with the intention of assuming control over public education in the United States. One inevitable conclusion I reach concerns the condition of those of us who reside in the profession: we exist under this state of siege, and our capacities to function are dangerously compromised in the seriously troubled and perilous environment of the school.

Giroux and Aronowitz marshal considerable and indicting argument against the long and obvious conservative attack on education. But in the authors’ portrait of education, the liberal argument fares little better. Giroux and Aronowitz suggest that in its refusal to understand education as politically organized, the liberal attack on education sustains the American myth of individuality and independence, and focuses not on dramatic reform, but instead, merely on ensuring that an illusory meritocracy be established in and by the schools. This meritocracy would be

measured by standardized test scores which should accurately assess each student's individual progress. This liberal argument, which I suspect has enabled such liberals as Ted Kennedy to vote for No Child Left Behind, supports greater school funding to ensure equal opportunities of education so that every child might succeed. This is not an ineffective goal, though as David Berliner (2006) writes, putting monies into the schools without also addressing the communities in which the schools exist is pointless. Finally, though Giroux and Aronowitz are sympathetic to each of the several radical critiques of education, they acknowledge that each is limited and insufficiently addresses the serious problem facing education and schooling in the United States.

In order to end this state of siege, Giroux and Aronowitz mean to "invent a language of possibility [to] confront liberal and radical critiques which although valuable, have abandoned the quest for a critical education in our schools" (1985, x). I do not want to here address this language of possibility, though I must say that from the Rabbis I have learned this: When the angels come to Abraham's tent, we are told that Abraham said "And I will fetch a morsel of bread," and he immediately did so. However, when Sarah died and Abraham desired to purchase a burial place, the land's owner, Ephron, effusively offers Abraham the land for free, and then charges him an exorbitant price for the land. From this, Rabbi Elazar said, we derive "that the righteous say little but do much [whereas] the wicked say much but do not do even a little." Regardless of the intentions of these authors, in the center of this siege 'education' sits, beset about by forces warring over who in the United States will overrun and control it, and a language of possibility seems to me at this time an ineffective response. This portrait of siege positions the population of the schools *of whatever political persuasion* as entrapped zealots holed up in the Masada-like fortress of education. There are, as I earlier noted, response precedents for such positions.

In this situation, I think, we do have choices, though none seems at all appealing or productive. We might succumb to the political forces beyond our control and accede to their agenda of accountability and managed curriculum. In such case, I think we cease being teachers and become technicians of the state. We deny everything we have lived with and for, give over our authority, and deny our ethical stance. This way madness lies. Or we might join the educational underground, and continue our endangered practice, surrounded by hostile forces from whom we must remain hidden, and who would destroy us for our resistance. Or we might openly revolt and suffer the severe consequences of the conquerors.

# 1

The standards-based movement, most recently given national support by the administrative, educational mandates of the Bush administrations's No Child Left Behind (NCLB), serves a similar purpose as the platform used by the Romans to overrun Masada: to aid the assault and capture of not only the schools of education, but even the destruction of public education itself. Government

assumption of educational mandates, the privatization of public schools, the establishment of a prescribed and standardized curriculum, the profound control over teacher initiative and possibility, and the ascendancy of accrediting bodies which will monitor the behaviors and curricula of schools of education portend the end of public education in the United States and the evisceration of meaningful learning in the schools. Furthermore, as standardized curriculum and assessment based measures govern the activities of the school, teachers' influence over matters of curriculum and learning declines further. Thus, at present, prerequisite courses in classroom management, designed by a mélange of educational psychologists and curriculum developers (at least), are mandated for most pre-service teachers so that they learn how the classroom must be handled to ensure the appropriate acquisition of the competencies that have been by experts established. Schools of Education reorganize to accommodate the strictures of accrediting bodies. We are no longer free to speak or to act. Rather, we are like the unnamed Player, to whom Hamlet said, "You could, could you not, study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which I would set down?" Thus, teachers and teacher educators strut and fret their hour on the stage, and then are heard no more.

This movement asserts that standards are what every student must know and therefore, what every teacher must teach (see Ravitch, 1995). By any other name, it would still stink. This standards/performance-based movement has its origins in the connectionist behaviorism of the early twentieth century, and in the behavioral objectives movement which has dominated education ever since Thorndike formulated his "laws of education." This ideological position purports to ensure that education consists of carefully defined competencies, that those competencies are precisely detailed and ordered, and that teachers will know and teach these specific competencies to students. In order to accomplish these activities, specific content and activity—curriculum and methods—must be prescribed by experts, and the classroom defined by specialists who spend, alas, very little time teaching in them. Indeed, these demagogues are too busy learning what the teachers must do to discover what teachers already are doing. J. Wesley Null (2003, 188) notes that as early as 1926, in their report entitled *The California Curriculum Study*, William Chandler Bagley and George Kyte urged "legislators to listen more to people such as themselves who spent their lives studying education, rather than succumbing merely to the whims and caprices of the political climates of the times." Alas, almost eight decades later, we are yet prey to the pressures of political ill-winds.

Of course, as Franklin Bobbitt argued in 1918, these standards will be variously achieved by differing students. A measured system of grades would be established to measure the skill level for each individual and each competency. Teachers must be trained to utilize pre-established materials, often in the form of monologic, dull, and expensive textbooks and accompanying materials, to ensure that convenient, standardized materials and evaluative procedures are employed; sometimes teachers are even taught how to compose appropriate assessment tools in order to evaluate achievement of standardized curricula.<sup>1</sup> Education becomes the transference of

these skills and competencies to children in such a way that no child *ought* to be left behind. Thus perpetuates the absurd American myth that failure in schools is either the result of individual nonachievement or teacher incompetence. For the former, there is the threat of low-wage jobs (alas, the reality of these fates exist for too many of our students—even for those who do achieve), and sterile lives. In some schools, school psychologists and guidance counselors are present in woefully insufficient numbers to address individual failures.

Recent accreditation movements are an attempt to deal with the latter. Two recent books give voice to the conditions of siege which the teaching professions currently experience. Thus the siege continues.

## 2

E.D. Hirsch's newest polemic, *The Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (2006), functions as yet another assault on public education. Since the 1980's, Hirsch has been arguing for a curriculum of cultural literacy by which children will be introduced into the dominant culture through content oriented subject matter. Hirsch does not bother to situate his 'innovation' in the 19th century work of William Torrey Harris, where it certainly resides, or in the twentieth century classical arguments of Robert Hutchins, both of whom argued that education should transmit *to all* the received culture of *mostly European deceased white males*. These ideas, the argument goes, are obviously most worthy of transmission because they already had been the ideas transmitted, albeit by European white males. Hirsch does quote William Bagley, a founding member of the essentialist movement, but he does not mention Bagley's life long advocacy of a progressivism which Hirsch condemns. I addressed Hirsch's program almost two decades ago in an article in *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*. Hirsch had published a piece in *The New York Review of Books* in which he advocated for the necessity of implementing his 'educational innovation' of cultural literacy curriculums to students from Kindergarten through High School.<sup>2</sup> His article was entitled "The Primal Scene of Education." In my piece I noted that nowhere in Hirsch's cultural literacy project is the term 'primal scene' defined. Of course, I suppose a culturally literate person would have known the meaning of the term, but the reference to Freud's notion of 'primal scene,' a traumatic peek by the child at parents' having sexual relations, does not fit the context of Hirsch's article. I still think his allusion remains too elusive. Certainly, it is offered out of context and lacks meaning. The columns of items in Hirsch's 1987 book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, are characterized by historians as a "deeply traditionalist, culturally cramped view of the world . . ." (Nash, Crabtree and Dunn, 106). This list was considered by many historians and history faculty insufficient to prepare students for the new millennium. The siege continued, however, and every year or so the platform grew.

In this recent book, Hirsch argues that a reading problem now

exists in America's schools (indeed, say the critics, has always there existed, at least, *they* say, since those wolves-in-sheep's clothing, the progressives and whole language people, arrived on the educational primal scene), derives from the squishy attempts to teach reading as a formal process rather than ensuring that students acquire a strong base of conceptual knowledge—of content—so that they might read. That is, the argument goes, because the 'progressives' wanted to address the child's interests, no formal educational content could be raised except at the child's instigation. The teacher must follow the child's lead, and follow only that material which derived from the child. According to Hirsch, all that was left to teach was the formal processes of reading. This was a tragic mistake, Hirsch claims. He writes, "[T]he only way to improve scores in reading comprehension and to narrow the reading gap between groups is systematically to provide children with the wide-ranging specific background knowledge they need to comprehend what they read" (2006, 21). But the whole notion of a reading crisis misrepresents the state of the schools. That is, Hirsch assumes that because a child cannot (or does not!) read, it must be the fault of pedagogy. This is a woefully, false reduction. Unfortunately, Hirsch is woefully uninformed regarding most reading pedagogies and histories of education.

Interestingly enough, it is the behavioral objective movement and not the 'progressives' (Hirsch prefers the derogatory term 'romantics') which imposed on the reading field such skills-based pedagogy. This ideological position exists yet today under various names, but is commonly known as the sub-skill and/or direct teaching approach to reading. This belief holds that reading is a whole practice concatenated from a series of smaller, basic skills. If the skills were correctly taught, the argument continues, then the whole would certainly follow. Sub-skill approaches to reading posit a series of incremental but absolute competencies, which science and its instruments can accurately measure—letter recognition, phonemic awareness, literal and inferential comprehension abilities, vocabulary and decoding skills—the acquisitions of which will lead, of course, to fluent 'reading.' Exercises, worksheets and stories were created to teach the skills, and often were content-free or content-absurd in order to teach and to reinforce (a favorite behaviorist term) any one particular competency. Ironically, though Hirsch would not perhaps appreciate the irony, it was the whole language movement, which Hirsch decries, which argued for the use in pedagogy of meaningful and interesting content *to be read* so that the processes of reading would be learned.

Indeed, Hirsch seems not to distinguish teaching from learning; he assumes that what the teacher will teach, the student will learn. In 1916, John Dewey, (whom Hirsch excoriates whenever possible) debunks this view. Dewey wrote,

The conception that the mind consists of what has been taught, and that the importance of what has been taught consists in its availability for further teaching, reflects the pedagogues view of life. The philosophy is eloquent about the duty of the teacher in instructing pupils; it is almost silent regarding the privilege of learning. It emphasizes the influence of

intellectual environment upon the mind; it slurs over the fact that the environment involves a personal sharing in common experiences. It exaggerates beyond reason the possibilities of consciously formulated and used methods, and underestimates the role of vital, unconscious, attitudes. It insists upon the old, the past and passes lightly over the operation of the genuinely novel and unforeseeable. It takes, in brief, everything educational into account save its essence,—vital energy seeking opportunity for effective exercise (1916, 71-2).

Dewey, whom Hirsch apparently has little read and less understood, always argued for a content rich curriculum, organized and developed carefully by *the highly competent, skilled and intelligent teacher* about the student's interests. Here, however, is what Hirsch says about Dewey: "Just like Rousseau, Wordsworth and Dewey, our schools of education hold that unless school knowledge is connected to 'real life' in a 'hands-on' way, it is unnatural and dead; it is 'rote' and 'meaningless'" (Hirsch, 2006, 10). Thus, Hirsch first attributes to the progressives the abandonment of content, because, as he argues, the movement held that children are not interested in anything except what they have themselves inspired. This is a position never held by John Dewey, who might himself be quite surprised to be associated with Rousseau and Wordsworth. And secondly, Hirsch ascribes to the progressive agenda the emphasis on the present 'rote' and 'meaningless' methods of reading pedagogy as a formal discipline, because to the progressives all content had to be abandoned so that student interest could be considered. In this way, Hirsch accuses, acontextual teaching became *de rigueur*. This, too, is a false portrayal of the rich and extensive whole language movement. The man knows not about what he writes.

I have read a considerable amount of Dewey's writings, and I have nowhere yet seen where Dewey said anything approaching this idea. Indeed, in places too numerous to cite, Dewey argued for the exact opposite: Dewey said that education should take up where the child already stands in the discipline, and to lead the child to that place in knowledge where resides, and *must reside*, the adult. No less than the present standards-based advocates, Dewey pressed for the transmission of the culture to the child. However, Dewey said that the child and the curriculum must be understood as two points along a continuum and ought not to be opposed as antagonistic forces. Dewey depended on the high intellectual capacities of teachers to know into what knowledge the child must be led by that adult's remarkably cogent and perceptive understanding of where the child already stood in the discipline. Dewey believed (1898, 318) that children could "at an early day become acquainted with, and to use, in a personal and yet relatively controlled fashion, the methods by which truth is discovered and communicated, and to make his own speech a channel for the expression and communication of truth; thus, putting the linguistic side where it belongs—subordinated to the appropriation and conveyance of what is genuinely and personally experienced." But this complexity of Dewey is reduced to the statement: "Progressivism in education," says E. D. Hirsch, of whom Dewey ascribes as father,<sup>3</sup> "is just



another name for romanticism.” (2006, 5). E. D. Hirsch needs to enroll immediately in a course in curriculum theory.

Hirsch (2006, 1) opens his book thus: “The public sees that something is badly amiss in the education of our children.” There is no citation for this claim, but there is research suggesting that the American public expresses confidence in their local schools. In a survey by the Gallop poll, though only 19 percent of parents scored ‘the schools’ with a grade of A or B, 72 per cent of those polled gave their *local* school an A or a B. But the conservative response to ideas such as this was to express contempt for the American public. Denis Doyle of the Hudson Institute said, “This is scientific proof that ignorance is bliss.” Diane Ravitch claimed that American parents were ‘misinformed’ about the schools, and Chester Finn expressed the idea that “ordinary parents of the nation are not to be trusted with their opinions about public education” (1995, Berliner, 113). The idea that the public is seriously concerned about education is not borne out by asking the public.

Hirsch continues the attack: “[E]mployers now often need to rely on immigrants from Asia and Eastern Europe to do the math that our high school graduates cannot do.” There is no citation offered for this claim either. Indeed, it crosses my mind frequently that employers now often need to rely on immigrants from Asian and Eastern Europe to do our math because employers pay such workers far less in wages and benefits than they might have to pay American workers. Thus, American businesses regularly send their work overseas and pay absurdly low wages to native workers to maximize the company’s profits and increase stock prices and executive bonuses. There is a great deal of evidence for this observation. I have heard that the Big Mac order delivered at the drive-in window begins its phone journey in India. But Hirsch, making his claims based wholly on unreliable and even invalid test scores,<sup>4</sup> accuses the American schools of incompetence. “In fourth grade, American students score ninth in reading among thirty-five countries, which is respectable. By tenth grade they score fifteenth in reading among twenty seven countries, which is not promising at all for their (and our) economic future” (Hirsch, 2006, 1). As I have learned from Gerald Bracey (2003, 2006), these statistics are not only seriously flawed, but also misrepresent the actual state of the schools.

Ignoring for a moment the absurd claim that scores on standardized test for tenth graders is any indicator of future economic growth in the nation, let us listen to at least the cautions of The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. In their report, *How in the World do students read?*, the editors (1992, 7) write, “Is it fair and valid to compare the performance of countries that vary in so many different ways? Is it possible to adjust the performance levels of countries to make comparisons fair and valid?” The authors urge the presence of doubt in the reader and urge great caution in the use of the numbers they offer. Indeed, in their executive summary, the editors note that the factors which consistently differentiated high-scoring and low-scoring countries were large school libraries, large classroom libraries, regular book borrowing, frequent silent reading in class, frequent story reading aloud by teachers, and more

scheduled hours spent teaching the language” (1992, xii). Note, that of the first five factors, each depends on resources and monies. In 1837, even Horace Mann knew that students couldn’t learn to read if they had no access to books. Mann urged the towns in Massachusetts to establish libraries. Libraries are where the books to be read are kept for public use. In Minnesota this year, almost two-thirds of the school referenda were defeated, taking away money to purchase such resources as books and other reading materials. Thirty eight million United States citizens live in poverty. Some of those citizens are children attending school.

Furthermore, as Gerald Bracey (2006, 136) writes, though critics point to dire consequences for American stature and power as a result of American children’s average performance on International Tests<sup>5</sup>, in fact these fears are unrealized. Though “American students typically score about average” on International test scores, the World Economic Forum (WEF) in its 2004-5 report ranked the United States first in global competitiveness. Furthermore, the dramatic decline in the United States ranking in competitiveness is too often ascribed to the schools (as the peremptory Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957 was blamed on the sad condition of American educational institutions) when, in fact, *The New York Times* sees “China as the number one economy by 2050, with the United States second and India third.” Currently, as Bracey notes, neither China nor India appear in the rankings, and I am doubtful that the quality of their educational system can account for their rise in competitiveness. I am equally skeptical that the decline in a single rank can be ascribed to the failure of the schools in the United States.

The subtitle of Hirsch’s book states his perception of the real problem and solution: *Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children*. If Americans can’t read, it is because they do not possess the conceptual knowledge which comprehension requires. The problem, says Hirsch, is that “the low productivity of our schools is chiefly caused by bad theory rather than by innate teacher incompetence. We will not improve teacher effectiveness until we change the unproductive, romantic ideas that dominate teacher preparation and guarantee poor use of school time” (2006, 85). Not too much theory, says Hirsch, but too much ‘bad theory.’ And yet, there is little evidence that, indeed, our schools are failing. Furthermore, Hirsch suggests that the situation is exacerbated by the parents whose language patterns are not conducive to advancing language comprehension (2006, 85). His solution to this condition is that “from the standpoint of progress in language right now, schools themselves should try to become supereffective middle-class homes. If we can do that, higher school achievement and greater equity will be the result” (2006, 86). I do believe that this was the ideological position of the 19th century which desired to bring students into the classical culture of traditional materials, and of the early 20th century which meant to Americanize the children of immigrants. The brazenness of Hirsch to suggest that the middle class ought to be the model culture—is this the same middle class which is disappearing according to economic reports?—represents at the minimum a discredited colonialism. Furthermore, it would seem to me that American education has succeeded wonderfully as these children of immigrants successfully

fought America's wars, built American industries, and contributed to the development of the United States as the most powerful nation (at this point, an honor of dubious merit) in the world. Today, working forty hours at a minimum wage job, an adult can earn almost \$11,000.00 for a fifty-two week work year. At that rate, a family of three would be only four thousand dollars below the poverty level. Not much room for books in that economy.

Hirsch is quick to cast blame not merely on the teachers, but on the schools that have prepared them, though he is willing to excuse even those University teachers for being themselves poorly taught. The problem, Hirsch rants, is philosophy. "If teachers now lack the knowledge they need to teach reading and others subjects well, it is not because they are innately incompetent but because they have been trained under faulty romantic ideas about the nature of reading and the worthlessness of 'mere information.' Nor are the education professors who trained them natively incompetent. They too have been trained under faulty romantic ideas" (2006, 16). This endless regression ends, as does Polyphemus' sight, with Noman. Or as Hamlet says, 'nor woman either.' If the notion of education is itself a philosophy, then for Hirsch, the problem with education is that it has adopted the wrong philosophical perspective, which is to say, a philosophy with which he does not agree. The more serious issue, however, is that Hirsch's understanding of educational philosophy is seriously flawed. Hirsch's statement is a broadside against an educational philosophy with which he disagrees, but about which he seems to know very little.

Actually, for Hirsch it is not people but ideology at fault; he attributes all educational problems to a romanticism which Hirsch not only ill-defines but misrepresents. For example, Hirsch (2006, 5) writes: "Of course, historians don't always call these ideas romanticism. They have given them special American names. They call Emerson and Thoreau "Transcendentalists.' They call John Dewey . . . a 'pragmatist' or a 'progressive.' But progressivism in education is just another name for romanticism. Within Dewey's writings about education beats the heart of a romantic, as indicated by his continual use of the terms *development* and *growth* with regard to children . . ." The statement is astounding in its gross (in the several senses of that word) oversimplification of a very complex philosophical tradition, its absurd linking of transcendentalism, pragmatism and progressivism with an undefined romanticism, and its ignorance of at least Cornel West's text, *The Evasion of American Philosophy* (1989). Talk about cultural literacy deficits! And John Sexson, writing in the *Phi Delta Kappan* in 1938 writes, "No sane, intelligent progressive ever advocated any neglect of the 'essentials' or the 'fundamentals.' There was a lunatic fringe of radicals who did so advocate, but the whole movement should not be condemned because of the unintelligent ballyhoo of its would-be-friends or the gross misrepresentations of a sensation-seeking press" (in Null, 256). Amongst that sensation seeking press, E. D. Hirsch's work must rest.

The whole language movement which Hirsch (and others) blame for the present reading crisis is an educational philosophy, though certainly not one to which Hirsch ascribes much credibility. He

writes:

The dominant principles of naturalism and formalism, being opposed to the systematic teaching of a great deal of information, are deadly enemies of the reading goals of NCLB. Advances in reading will depend on students gaining a great deal of information. This conflict of ideas, is, then, the root cause of the impasse between the NCLB law and the schools, for the only way to improve scores in reading comprehension and to narrow the reading gap between groups is systematically to provide children with the wide-ranging specific background knowledge they need to comprehend what they read (2006, 21).

Hirsch's statement is a *non sequitur*, for no one would (or could!) argue from a different perspective, because nothing could be learned without *some* prior knowledge *and* without interest. Memorizing is hardly evidence of learning. Too, if students must have 'specific background knowledge' to comprehend what they read, then Hirsch and his associates must know already what students will read. And so we have returned to the classical and standardized curriculum of the early 20th century.

In fact, Hirsch misrepresents whole language by identifying it with naturalism and formalism, the former the belief that children should learn only that which interests them and develops naturally from their growth, and the latter the philosophy which argues that learning must consist of training in formal skills and in the absence of content. I cannot discover any threads which connect these three perspectives. Certainly, Hirsch could not be using naturalism in its literary sense: a method by which writers believed that they should apply scientific objectivity and precision in the observation and treatment of life, without idealizing, imposing value judgments, or avoiding what is regarded as repulsive. Nor is this naturalism that which holds that the natural world is the whole of reality and that scientific data can explain all phenomena. First, whole language is not a list of atheoretical methods and practices. Though what is called 'the whole language movement' has origins in the early part of the twentieth century (see Block, 1995), the contemporary manifestation of this "movement developed as a grassroots effort that emphasized teacher decision making in the classroom," learning that was "more collaborative, inquiry-based, meaning centered" and that valued "student experience and knowledge." It was a movement that critiqued conventional schooling and its "testing, tracking, standardization and imposed curriculum and that embraced a concern for education and social justice" (Coles, 2003, 11-12.) What whole language suggests is that the whole—meaning— is greater than and different from the sum of its parts; meaning is not the product of the concatenation of various answers derived from the separate skills by which reading has come to be defined. Rather, meaning is the sense we make when we seek answers to the questions we ask. Frank Smith writes (1985, 127), "To learn to read children must see ways of employing reading to further their own aims and interests." In the absence of aims and interests, comprehension cannot take place.

For some time I have looked at the bulletin board above my work table on which I have posted this sentence from Neils Bohr: "Science was about the results of experiment, not ultimate reality." Yet, Hirsch (and all of those other advocates of standards) look to 'science-based research' to justify their position. Opposing science and theory ("It was theory and not decisive data," Hirsch accuses (2006, 131), "that caused current reading problems to include trivial, disconnected reading materials and to allot too much time and effort to the teaching of formal comprehension strategies"), Hirsch applauds NCLB as "the most hopeful and important federal education legislation that has been enacted in recent years." NCLB legislation employs the term 'scientifically based research' 111 times. Valerie Reyna, speaking at a seminar "where leading experts in the fields of education and science discussed the meaning of [scientifically based research](#)" explained that scientific research is "evaluated primarily in two big dimensions. One of them is quality, and that is primarily in terms of scientific merit, and that has to do with the method... [\[R\]elevance and significance, obviously is the other criterion.](#)" That is, scientific research is research that accomplishes well what I want it to accomplish. Scientific research is ideological. Hirsch's advocacy of NCLB, and the laws basis in scientifically based research, belies his own theoretical positions. If Hirsch has built his castles in the air, then as Thoreau says, he ought to put the foundations under them.

Hirsch admonishes: unless this book's recommendations are adopted, then our educational system will continue to falter and fail. But, "if its recommendations are followed, reading scores will rise for all groups of children, and so will scores in math and science, because, as common sense would predict, reading is strongly correlated with ability to learn in all subjects. Equally important, social justice will be served, because the reading gap between social groups will be greatly narrowed by following the book's pro-knowledge recommendations" (2006, 21). This absurdly simplistic remedy belies the complex reality of the social scene of education.

### 3

Blaming the failure of America's schools on the poor quality of teacher preparation, the foes of public education continue to build the platform by which they intend to overrun the besieged partisans. Another front of this assault is aimed at Schools and Departments of Education. *Trivializing Teacher Education* (Johnson, Johnson, Fanenga, Ness, 2005) addresses the current effort to advocate for the establishment of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) as the sole legitimatizing body for all schools of education in the United States. It is NCATE's intent to assume complete authority for accrediting all schools of education which prepare America's teachers, and therefore, their intent to assert full control over the licensing of America's teachers. NCATE standards will become the standards for the field, and adherence to those standards, its advocates claim, will ensure the high quality of teachers of which our schools are in such desperate need. Blaming schools of education for the

abominable state of American education, policy makers and politicians argue that the NCATE standards must be established as the benchmark for all teacher education units which prepare students for teacher licensure. Operating on this element of fear, NCATE posts on its website (Johnson et al., 31) a piece by Linda Blanton titled “Parents: Do you know Who is Teaching Your Child?”<sup>6</sup> This title makes allusion to ubiquitous print and media advertisements directed at parents concerning drug and alcohol abuse of their children: the NCATE posting identifies the teacher with life endangering habits. It would be the conclusion that accrediting bodies such as NCATE would ensure the *safety* of every school child by ensuring the *quality* of the teacher who stands in front of the room. Of course, the obscenity of this claim almost defies imagination: equating schooling with drug and alcohol abuse, and the explicit danger in a school without NCATE approval represents an irresponsibility which almost smacks of criminality. The insinuation, however, serves to give substance to NCATE’s dubious claim to authority.

Authority is what NCATE desires. To assert it, NCATE must speak, or purport to speak, from a position of certain and absolute knowledge. NCATE<sup>7</sup> must know, or must claim to know, the exact requirements and capabilities of excellent teachers. It is, of course, an unsubstantiated claim. NCATE advertises: “Research shows that fully prepared and licensed teachers increase student achievement. Are the teachers in your district well-prepared? . . . Find out if prospective teachers have graduated from a professionally accredited preparation program through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education” (Johnson et al., 2006, 29). The argument is tautological and the research superficial, dubious, or non-existent. Since all states require licensure of some form of another, then the key words in NCATE’s claim are ‘fully prepared.’ In the context of NCATE’s claim, ‘fully prepared’ could only refer to teacher preparation in line with NCATE standards. On the one hand, the research showing “that fully prepared and licensed teachers increase student achievement” seems rather obvious: well-qualified teachers increase student learning! As my grandmother would say, “*Nu*, this is news?” But on the other hand, a fully prepared teacher cannot teach a child who, for reasons which have nothing to do with the school or the teacher, cannot and/or will not learn. As my grandmother would say, “*Oy vey!*” Furthermore, the research alluded to in NCATE’s statement does not speak to the specific content of the NCATE standards; the research simply claims that fully prepared and licensed teachers increase student achievement. NCATE misleadingly suggests that its standards are those addressed by the research. It is a false claim.

NCATE’s authority rests in its assertion that it knows the precise pedagogical path a candidate must take to attain this state of full preparedness. “NCATE helps ensure highly qualified teachers for America’s children” (Johnson et al., 31). Again, this is a dubious, misleading, and tautological claim. First, the traits of a good teacher have yet to be defined anywhere with any credibility whatsoever. Second, there is no evidence that teachers who have graduated from NCATE accredited institutions are more effective than those educated in non-NCATE accredited schools. Third, there is no evidence that teachers who have graduated from non-NCATE

accredited institutions are ineffective. But, NCATE asserts, a highly qualified teacher must be a teacher who graduates from a school accredited by NCATE.

NCATE asserts that teachers must be prepared with content and pedagogical knowledge and that this knowledge be tested by standardized tests. The first standard states: "Candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other professional school personnel know and demonstrate the content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn." By this standard, NCATE means to ensure that teacher candidates possess adequate content and pedagogical knowledge requisite to teach. Of course, not everyone agrees that a standardized curriculum leads to knowledge. Joseph Schwab complained that "An undergraduate curriculum which is a mere inculcation of what I have elsewhere called a rhetoric of conclusions and of a body of rote methods for solving rote problems . . . leads to protest and resentment, [and] results in noneducation" (1969, 19). Yet, it is exactly this curriculum which NCATE and its supporters promote. Nor does agreement anywhere exist as to the precise "Pedagogical, professional knowledge, skills and dispositions necessary to help all students learn." It is hubris to lay claim to this knowledge, and it is unethical to hold teacher candidates responsible for this impossible knowledge. Finally, it is irresponsible to assume that the pedagogies already in place and practice in teacher education programs lack all rigor and require replacement by NCATE. There are some things which the tests and standards do not measure which are essential to good teaching: creativity, critical thinking, persistence, curiosity, self-discipline, senses of beauty and wonder and humor, humility, arrogance, compassion and courage. All the content in the world will not make a teacher who lacks even one of these qualities and/or dispositions.

Now, it would seem that standards establishing content knowledge at least would be relatively easy to accomplish. Every field has its specialized professional association (SPA), and on a regular basis, these professional organization review and revise the standards established for the field. There is, for example, the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the National Council of History Teachers, the International Reading Association. There are Johnson et al. state, nineteen such organizations in all. The membership of these SPAs are scholars and expert practitioners in the field. It is they who have devoted their lives to the development of knowledge and expertise in their chosen discipline. Yet, NCATE has established itself not only as overseer to these SPAs, but in fact, as usurper of the authority of these professional organizations. NCATE asserts that the only way that content knowledge can be assessed is by NCATE approved standardized tests which by their very existence define the knowledge that is most worth. NCATE's designation of the appropriate tests establishes the standards for these disciplines.

The validity of these scores is dubious at best and non-existent at worse. Johnson et al. provide evidence that scores on content tests are a very poor predictor of teacher effectiveness. The authors (Johnson et al., 2006, 159) quote Don Medley, a former senior research scientist at the Educational Testing Service (ETS): "No

scores of any kind of test of subject matter knowledge are related to teaching effectiveness. There is then no reason to expect that future use of teacher competency tests will have any impact whatsoever on the quality of teaching in the public school.” Which is not to say that for teachers content is irrelevant. Rather, it is irresponsible to assume that teachers lack content knowledge, and that only NCATE approved tests ensure sufficient presence of it. More, as education is an intellectual profession, it is absurd to define knowledge by the most limited means available—the standardized test. Rather, it is intellectual rigor and curiosity which must be given priority, and in this atmosphere there must be too many questions and very few definitive answers. NCATE’s first standard, which demands the answer, closes the educational pursuit rather than opening it.

On the other hand, standards are not definitive. As the most recent controversy surrounding the History standards show (Nash et al. 2000),<sup>8</sup> the opinion of the experts does not always carry weight. Rather, the presence of many experts ensures a variety of knowledge standards across the political spectrum. In 1994, Lynne Cheney attacked the promulgated standards for being too politically correct, not adequately recognizing some of the great figures of the past, and for giving too much attention to women and minority groups. It is not my intention to enter into the debate over the history standards, but the debate itself indicates the dubious nature of such standards. Whose standards they are, and what political purpose they serve is a far more interesting and productive interrogation than the mere transmission of these in our schools. The writing of the history standards was directed from the National Endowment for the Humanities and its hand-picked body of scholars, but the Endowment rejected the report offered by its appointed representatives. Clearly, then, standards are not just about knowledge. Standards are a political instrument of a particular point of view; the establishment of such standards does not ensure an adequate education. Indeed, given the political nature of standards, it would be, perhaps, those who choose not to attend too carefully to them who might be considered the better teachers.

Teacher preparation is an arduous and intellectually uplifting occupation. And I do not mean here to elaborate further than I have already done elsewhere (see Block, 2004). There I complained that “we have yet evidences of serious malaise and ineptitudes in our educational institutions, indicated not by low test scores but by low intellectual expectations; epitomized not by intellectual inadequacies, but by avoidance of intellectual challenge. Our schools are characterized not by intellectual rigor nor active pursuit of meaning and meaning making, but by intellectual retreat and cravenness” (Block, 2004, 163-4). These conditions are inspired by the establishment push for NCATE accreditations. For the test which must inevitably come at the end of the term, we teach the material which will appear on the test. Nothing else seems to matter.

NCATE standard one insists that each institution that educates teachers ensures that each candidate possesses pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Ah, were this possible! Even if there would exist a



regimen of skills and knowledge and dispositions which were necessary to help all students learn—and there most definitely is not such a regimen—there would never be agreement on the nature of these skills, knowledge and dispositions. Herbert Kliebard's book, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (1987), portrays a field contested, in which the content, methods and dispositions inevitably vary according to the ideology of the practitioner. James Macdonald's essay, "The Transcendental Development Ideology of Education" speaks as well to a variety of pedagogical skills and professional knowledge, skills and dispositions requisite to the successful teacher in the 21st century, but NCATE standard one does not seem to recognize the nature of this task. Rather, NCATE would reduce the complexity of this complex conversation to a monologic whisper.

The necessity of teacher licensure is often justified by a comparison to the licensing of medical doctors. It is a seriously flawed analogy. Whereas there is no question where the heart resides, there is a great deal of question of what constitutes knowledge and learning, and certainly where it may reside. The content of knowledge requisite for the medical profession may change rapidly, but it is very clear of what that knowledge consists. But, what makes a great teacher? A fully prepared teacher, what does she know? I haven't the slightest idea, nor, I believe, does any one else, though the various agencies have invented standards or quality principles to measure. In fact, as Johnson suggests, the research is doubtful. Indeed, whatever evidence exists (see Berliner, 2006) suggests that it is the socioeconomic level of the students that determines success in school rather than the quality of the teachers. As the most brilliant doctor cannot save the terminally ill cancer patient, so the most able and caring teacher cannot help the hungry, terrified and hopeless student learn. And if my brilliant diagnostician is a gruff and abrupt doctor, does that call into question his prescription for my health.

The practices of accreditation in the medical profession are often cited as models for teacher-educators, and Johnson and his colleagues address the falseness of this analogy. The American Medical Association requires that doctors complete a rigorous program of study, engage in internships and residencies before they can be ready for independent practice. Accreditation advocates argue the same should be true for teachers. But, the analogy is fatally flawed. The content required of a doctor is clearly delineated, and has its foundations in biology, chemistry and related sub-disciplines. Incontestably, the body organs are identifiable and their structural properties and chemistries determined and classified. Everyone (except perhaps the lunatic fringe which exists in *all* professions, yes, even education) agrees where each organ belongs, and most agree to the functions of each organ etc., etc., etc., as says the King of Siam. For the most part, the content required for a medical degree is carefully defined and constrained. But as the recent cultural wars fought over the history standards reveals, (see Nash et al., 2000), and the more recent debate over the teaching of mathematics in the school, the content required of a teacher is not at all clear and is often contested by various political factions. NCATE might insist that teacher education programs assess their candidates by standardized tests of content knowledge, but these

assessments in no sense guarantee that that knowledge is exactly the knowledge that the teacher requires or must teach. *Nor is there any assessment tool in existence which can guarantee that a student will learn what the teacher teaches regardless of teacher test scores or GPA, or even her personality.* Teaching is not an exact science, any more than is medicine, but at least the body to be treated by medical procedures has . . . well, physical substance. But where is the mind that must be learning when its body is troubled, or sick or hungry?

Board examinations attest to the competency of the doctor, though no doctor I have yet visited posts her scores in the examination office. How does one know if the doctor of record scored high or low on the standardized test? It would seem to me that given the stakes in medicine, we should only license those who score perfectly on those tests. Berliner and Biddle (1995,108) report that a 1991 Harvard study found that 80,000 people die each year and another 150,000 are injured as a result of medical negligence in hospitals. Berliner and Biddle also report that of the 10,289 physicians disciplined by state and federal agencies in 1992 are still practicing. An article in *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* claims that over 225,000 people die each year from “iatrogenic causes”<sup>9</sup>([Medical Malpractice](#)). *Medical News Today* summarizes an article in the *Washington Post* from 13 April, 2005, reporting how “state medical boards nationwide allow physicians with ‘well-documented drug and alcohol problems’ to continue to practice, despite multiple relapses and the potential risk for patients. Between 1999 and 2004, state boards disciplined nearly 1400 physicians for substance abuse, and disciplined more than 300 doctors more than one time ([Medical News Today](#)). Licensing does not ensure quality. And what of those who pass the tests and do not practice the material—who go into alternative medicine. But that is another story.

In 2003, the census bureau reports that there were 819,000 physicians and surgeons in the United States. In 2003, 4, 713,000 teachers. In 2003, 106,383 undergraduate education degrees were awarded and 136, 579 [masters degrees were awarded](#). In that same year, 38,000 [law degrees were awarded](#), at 186 schools, and 15,000 medical degrees awarded. In the United States today there are 426 medical schools and 23 osteopathic schools. There are well over two thousand teacher education programs currently operating today, and this does not include newly developed on-line programs. The attempt to control curriculum is, if not absurd, certainly autocratic.

As for the dispositions of which NCATE speaks: I have nowhere seen a clear definition of what these elusive entities might consist. I think that arguing about them, however, is akin to counting the angels on the head of a pin. And equally as useful.

Finally, the authority of NCATE standards rests in the assurance that the measures of assessment which an institution that is NCATE approved employs measures which accurately, unequivocally, and universally define the achievement of excellence by their candidates, and that these measures can then translate into practice. “NCATE has also been working with one national testing

company to ensure that its teacher licensing tests are aligned with rigorous professional standards” (Johnson, 31). Again, the arguments are deceptive, if not actually specious. First, NCATE says only that the tests will align with ‘rigorous professional standards,’ obviously those which will be the standards set by NCATE. In this tautology, the achievement of excellence is only the achievement of NCATE standards, and as Johnson et al. suggest, the research here is of dubious merit. Secondly, since standardized tests claim an objective measure of achievement, and since all students do not score equally, then it follows that some students will achieve lower scores on these exams than other students. The question is not raised if a student with a low score from a NCATE accredited school is a better teacher than a student from a non-NCATE institution who scores high on a different measure of assessment.

The idea of standardized tests raise several other real problems than the dubious nature of their reason. Johnson et al. report, there are at present more than six hundred different tests now being used to license teachers, though about Educational Testing Service (ETS) and National Evaluation Systems (NES) are the biggest test producers. “ETS administers more than 144 different tests; its most popular is the Praxis series used in thirty-two states. NES has developed and marketed more than four hundred teacher examinations” (Johnson, 105). First, as Johnson et al. report, if tests are written to assess achievement of standards, then “teachers may teach only items that are evaluated by standards” (Johnson, 104). Curriculum developers and test makers will create only those products which reflect the standards which the tests will measure. A national curriculum will result. Secondly, these tests are not subject to research themselves, “and not available for public scrutiny” (Johnson, 105). It is impossible to measure the technical quality of the tests NCATE uses for its measures. Finally, as Johnson et al. report, “using standards to measure educational quality may cause us to limit the repertoire of behaviors taught and observed” (Johnson, 104). Robert Glaser writes, “Many of those personal qualities that we hold dear—resilience and courage in the face of stress, a sense of craft in our work, a commitment to justice and caring in our social relationships, a dedication to advancing the public good in communal life—are exceedingly difficult to assess. And so, unfortunately, we are apt to measure what we can, and eventually come to value what is measured over what is left unmeasured. The shift is subtle and occurs gradually.” NCATE threatens to transform teaching into a technology and to turn teachers into technicians. Interestingly enough, NCATE threatens the future of education.

The third NCATE standard looks to ensure that “the unit and its school partners design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice so that teacher candidates and other school personnel develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn.” This standard clearly refers to pre-clinical and student teaching experiences. But this student teaching experience is at best problematic. Students practice teaching before they ever have graduated from the university teacher education program, and are dependent on the approval of their university supervisor and classroom sponsor for grades. There is little opportunity to actually practice, and mistakes

are often not welcome. Deborah Britzman's *Practice Makes Practice* (2003, 174), calls into question the very nature of these practical experiences, and the efficacy of them in preparing teachers. Summarizing the student teaching experience of Jack August, Britzman writes, "the situation of student teaching, a circumstance so immediate in its demands and so isolating by design that Jack was never really challenged to participate in or value his own struggle for meaning, and hence, attend to his struggle for voice. And thus many of Jack's dilemmas were an effect of not just the structure of student teaching and teacher education, and the discourse made available there, but of the economic retrenchment that structures Greenville's curriculum in such a way that Jack would never have the opportunity to teach a subject area he knew." Even if NCATE could define exactly the qualities of a perfect teacher education program, and it cannot do so, and even if NCATE could ensure that every teacher candidate met the standards established for the program, which it cannot, and even if NCATE could ensure that every clinical experience was perfectly designed to permit the candidate to demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions NCATE defines as necessary to the teacher, NCATE cannot control for the effects of the outside world on the world of the school. And without that control, all of NCATE's promises are empty and its claims specious. Finally, if NCATE and the other critics of teachers and education pursued the medical model, then all teachers would first have to graduate from a degree program before they interned in any building with actual students; they would be paid for their work, albeit at even lower salaries than full-time licensed teachers, and they would belong to a community of interns all working in the same location, and they would each possess a certain autonomy to practice. None of these conditions exist today in education, and NCATE and its advocated propose not greater engagement for teacher-candidates in the activities of education, but actually seem to mandate less rigor and experience.

The fourth NCATE standard addresses the university's commitment to diversity, and that the institution "designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and experiences for candidates to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn" (Johnson, 87). This is, of course, an admirable standard, but it thoroughly ignores the social effects of poverty, disease, crime, broken families, etc. which research shows has powerful effects on learning. As Johnson et al. write,

No NCATE standard deals with the pressing problems in American education such as the resegregation of schools, the heavy-handed accountability demands for public schools but not private schools, the unequal funding of public schools, the reduction in school funding in many locales . . . No NCATE standards address preparing beginning teachers to deal with hungry or alienated or drug addicted youth. No NCATE standards address preparing new teachers to teach geometry or geography in an environment of youth gang violence (Johnson, 89).

In his recent article, David Berliner (2006) shows how ineffective all curriculum and teaching will be in the absence of real school

reform—the improvement of the communities and families in which these schools and children are nested. It seems to me that until these issues are dealt with up front, all the standards in the world will not significantly affect the quality of education anywhere in the United States. Nor will the promise of education espoused by its present-day critics ever be realized.

Standard Five assesses whether the faculty in the institution have sufficient qualifications and capabilities and opportunities for professional development. What exactly counts here as qualified? It seems to me we have returned to the issue of test scores: if sufficient numbers of students in a particular program pass the tests, then clearly the faculty must be qualified. Of course, faculty will be examined for their degrees, their scholarly activities etc. But, the presence of an intellectual community does not at all ensure the engagement of students in scholarship. Joseph Schwab (1969, 19) complained about this almost forty years ago, “There is an intellectual community of sorts, but the students don’t belong to it, not even as second-class citizens . . . There is exclusion from the possibility of a role in the intellectual community.”

Finally, NCATE standard six questions whether the unit has sufficient financial resources to meet its mission. Bingo.

## 4

It is interesting to me that the ‘manufactured crisis’<sup>10</sup> in education demands the rigorous attention that NCATE and its representatives now pay to education. The threat of national collapse should accreditation by NCATE not become *de rigeur* smacks of demagoguery, especially in the face of real evidence to the contrary. Gerald Bracey (2003, 126) reports that

Achievement test scores are at record levels, and the number of students taking Advanced Placement examinations has been soaring, even as the number of students declined each year after the Baby Boom passed through. Seven of the nine trends in reading, mathematics, and science of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) are at all time highs. If the demographic changes in who takes the SAT are factored out, there remains only a small decline in the verbal score and none at all in mathematics . . . the proportion of students scoring above 650 on the SAT mathematics tests is at an all-time high and U.S. students are near the top in reading and average in mathematics and science. No doubt there are problems in the American schools—real problems, indeed—but as Berliner and Biddle (1995, 127) write, “Despite incessant claims to the contrary from critics and an ill-informed press, in aggregate the public schools of American look pretty good.”<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, even if test scores slightly decline, about how many

questions wrong are we speaking, and what exactly is the crisis expressed in those scores. Bracey writes (2003, 160): “[T]here is no correlation between achievement, as measured with test scores, and international market competitiveness as defined by the World Economic Forum.” If test scores *seem* to be in decline (and, of course, this is a doubtful claim), then clearly American power, which at least during the 1990’s was at a remarkable high, (how exactly American power is tied to education is never defined by education’s critics) must not be dependent on these test scores. The crisis of the schools alarmingly clucked over by Chicken Licken is hardly that, and the claims that the sky is falling serves only the sales force for umbrellas which Chicken Licken’s colleagues market. It seems to me that what teachers are now doing is what they ought to continue to do: to teach and learn ably under conditions which in the best of circumstances are often difficult and arduous. We are capable, intelligent and highly skilled practitioners despite the calumny we suffer. And I cannot even begin to address the circumstances of too many teachers for whom conditions of ‘difficult and arduous’ would be a relief.

And perhaps what *else* teachers might do at this moment is to scream bloody hell at the critics and hacks who blindly and selfishly pursue another agenda than educational reform and daily impugn the character and work of the teaching force.

It is curious that critics of education ascribe a lack of national curriculum and professional standards to the presence of crisis in the schools. Yet a cursory look about the nation suggests far more serious areas of concern. The corporate malfeasances of the past six years point to a real problem in the ethics and practice in business world; by the logic of Hirsch and NCATE, we must point the finger at the schools of business for the serious economic and moral crisis in the United States. Sexual misconduct in the ministry taints the church, even as it leaches into the offices of the United States government. Unethical lobbying and influence peddling corrupts the very democracy about which the schools are intended to teach and to protect. The blatant lying engaged in by this present administration in its planning and execution of the War in Iraq, and the administration’s attack on civil liberties in order to consolidate its power and protect its selfish interests, corrupts the very fabric of our society. And in the face of all of this corruption and more, NCATE and its advocates are concerned about the bubbling in of answers on math tests by eighth graders! In this environment, the schools seem a beacon of light and moral stature.

## 5

However, if authority the authority that NCATE seeks, if must be authentic, valuable and earned. The authority must be conferred and not assumed. The latter smacks of an authoritarianism we would resist. Johnson et al. show how the “NCATE brand” creates an authority which derives not from the profession at all but from its own marketing devices. Hence, the NCATE store sells apparel (golf and t-shirts), pens, mugs and mousepads all with the NCATE logo. On my campus, at this time a non-NCATE institution, faculty

who serve NCATE as examiners sport NCATE polo shirts the way my daughters wear Abercrombie merchandise.<sup>12</sup> Faculty on campus walk around wearing NCATE t-shirts as students walk about wearing t-shirts from the latest concert they have attended. NCATE offers advice to speakers who will speak before state policy makers: “You can help by strongly encouraging unaccredited schools of education to pursue high standards through seeking and achieving NCATE accreditation” (Johnson, 11). NCATE hosts clinics and conferences for high stakes policy makers in luxurious and expensive surroundings, sends around sample press releases which member schools paraphrase with brazen liberties in their own publications and advertisements. NCATE suggests that its advertisements in such publications as *Newsweek* are endorsements, and asserts a credibility and importance which it should not assert. Indeed, a letter signed by Arthur Wise, President of NCATE, and Nancy Zimpher Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, an NCATE-accredited school, states that “The evidence is unequivocal: the single most important school variable in improving student learning in our Nation’s schools is the quality of the teacher. This is a variable we can affect” (Johnson, 14-15). This is an absurd statement. Placing complete responsibility for learning on the teacher, Wise and Zimpher ignore the entire social milieu out of which the school grows and in which it exists, and remain blind to the enormous body of research which explores the relationship between socio-economic status and student learning. As David Berliner passionately (2006, 50) writes, “In my estimation we will get better public schools by requiring of each other participation in building a more economically equitable society. This is of equal or greater value to our nation’s future well-being than a fight over whether phonics is scientifically based, whether standards are rigorous enough, or whether teachers have enough content knowledge.” How absurd to consider that school personnel could ever have the power to make the world disappear so that we could function in the world. And yet, in their literature NCATE makes very little reference to factors other than teacher certification by NCATE to ensure an improvement in schooling. But the thrust of this letter which serves to support the absolute necessity and centrality of NCATE in the ‘improvement of education’ only thrusts NCATE to the fore.

## 6

Who NCATE might be and how they construct their position and practice is not, then, a small issue, given its potential power. The genesis of NCATE suggests at best a lack of unity regarding licensure, though NCATE remains silent about this site of contention and competition. In the past fifty years, NCATE has become the premier agency of accreditation, though it is not the only accrediting agency presently issuing marks of approval, nor is its own position without disagreement.

To my mind, NCATE has a curious genesis. The organization came into existence in 1954 as a result of the work of the leaders of five already-existing organizations: the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the Council of Chief State

School Officers (CCSSO), the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC), the National Education Association (NEA), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), AACTE was founded in 1948, by Charles Hunt, president of Oneonta Teachers College. In this founding, Hunt seems to have coordinated the merger of six separate teacher education associations ([AACTE](#)). That is, as if out of the head of Zeus, NCATE appeared fully grown and formed. Its sole function was accreditation, but it derived its authority from groups who questioned its own authority to accredit. For example, in the early 1950's AACTE "recognized the competing demands placed on it as both an accrediting body and a professional organization." It is an interesting distinction: AACTE suggests that as a professional organization charged with organizing and supporting the profession of teaching, it could not also serve as an accrediting body making judgements on the individual institutions which subscribed to AACTE for professional support. AACTE would not support teacher education and then condemn it at the same time, though according to its web site, AACTE still participates in accreditation as a constituent of NCATE. NCATE, however, seems to have no similar compunction. Nonetheless, despite its disavowal of the power of accreditation, AACTE remains complicit by association, though it cravenly assumes no responsibility.

In 1954, AACTE joined with the NEA, CCSSO and NASDTEC to establish NCATE. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is "a nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, and extra-state jurisdictions" ([CCSSO](#)). According to its website, CCSSO "provides leadership, advocacy, and technical assistance on major educational issues. The Council seeks member consensus on major educational issues and expresses their views to civic and professional organization, federal agencies, Congress and the public." CCSSO seems an authentic professional organization; it places its focus on real and substantive issues which concern the development of education in terms of 'advocacy' and 'technical assistance.' Where there is conflict, they represent the educational establishment; in places where assistance is required, CCSSO offers it. In their literature at least, they do not exist to measure nor judge, but to offer support for the difficult work of the schools.<sup>13</sup> However, CCSSO does not seem to have school teachers as members, and certainly not as guiding spirits of the organization. Though its purpose is supportive, its structure is patriarchal.

The third organization, (NASDTEC) "represents professional standards boards, commissions and state departments of education in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, the Department of Defense Education Activity, the U.S. Territories, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario, which are responsible for the preparation, licensure and discipline of educational personnel" ([NASDTEC](#)). It "is dedicated to licensing well-prepared, safe and wholesome educators for our nation's schools." An apparently umbrella organization, NASDTEC acts as a clearinghouse for all certification requirements in the jurisdictions for which it assumes responsibilities. Though it apparently insists that teacher be licensed, apparently, NASDTEC, has given over its



authority to NCATE for licensure,. As a professional organization, NASDTEC also seems to lack teacher representation.

The fourth organization instrumental in forming NCATE is the National Educator's Association (NEA). Begun in 1857, the NEA has crusaded "for the rights of all educators and the children whose lives they touch." Though early representatives were mostly male administrators and college professors, the NEA has continued to enlarge its member base and today, through its merger in 1966 with the American Federation of Teachers, it represents a large percentage of the teachers presently working in the public schools in the United States. The NEA also discusses and recommends curriculum, suggests school policies, and represents the teachers of the public schools. To my knowledge, the NEA has never had accrediting powers.

Finally, the last founding component of NCATE is the National School Board Association (NSBA), founded in 1940, as "a not for profit Federation of State associations of school boards throughout the United States. Our mission is to foster excellence and equity in public education through school board leadership" ([NSBA](#)). This organization represents the local governing bodies of the schools of a community, and though certainly concerned with education, has as its constituency mostly people who are not educators. School board members are elected from the community to represent that community in running the schools, but they need not (and often are not!) educators. The power of local control of schools and education obviates the ability of NSBA from being any national force in accreditation, but as a constituent of NCATE it assumes standards which it has not promulgated. Since 1954, NCATE has advocated for its premier role in the accreditation of teachers, but not without some disagreement.

The Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) was formed in 1987 s "a consortium of state education agencies and national educational organizations dedicated to the reform of the preparation, licensing, and on-going professional development of teachers." INTASC, too, has its core standards, its translation of these standards into "model licensing standards in major subjects, and initiated development of a new licensing examination." ([New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium](#)) the presence of this organization suggests at least a struggle in the field for control over standards and licensure. In 1997, doubts concerning NCATE led to the formation of yet another accrediting body; the Teacher Education Accrediting Council (TEAC) was formed "as a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving academic degree programs for professional educators, those who will teach and lead in schools, pre-K through grade 12 . . . TEACS's primary work is accrediting undergraduate and graduate professional education programs in order to assure the public about the quality of college and university programs" ([TEAC](#)).

TEAC acts now as a competing agency to NCATE. To receive TEAC approval and accreditation, programs must give satisfactory evidence of student learning, valid assessment of student learning, and evidence of institutional learning. Each of these larger goals is

composed of components. All in all there are four quality principles: NCATE has six standards by which schools are measured and accredited. Interestingly, TEAC states that each component of Quality principle 1, Evidence of student learning, includes (must include) [“cross-cutting liberal education themes: learning how to learn, multicultural perspectives and accuracy, and technology”](#)

This is a goal that points to the general education component of much undergraduate education. Thus, TEAC argues that a teacher must have received exposure to, in the clichés of the times, elements of how to be a life long learner, knowledge of multiculturalism, and an awareness of technology. Thus, TEAC assesses not only the quality of teacher education program, but the quality of the institution as a whole.

NCATE positions itself as the premier evaluator of colleges and universities, and the ultimate defender of quality education. In an ad in *Education Week* (2004) NCATE states “Research shows that fully prepared and licensed teachers increase student achievement. Are the teachers in your district well-prepared? . . . Find out if prospective teachers have graduated from a professionally accredited preparation program through the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education” (in Johnson, 29). Implied in this statement is the idea that only those teacher education programs endorsed by NCATE are adequately prepared to practice in the schools. These are non-governmental agencies, but NCATE and TEAC assert governmental function: they claim to authorize the licensing of teachers for the public schools. Without an NCATE approval, the teacher’s competence is suspect.

Interestingly, INTASC, NASDTEC and TEAC seem still to have accrediting powers. That is, there are competing agencies, and presumably, differing standards. What is a teacher to do? Furthermore, the U.S. Constitution guarantees that education, a power not delegated to the National government, must be left to the states; individual states license teachers. But increasingly, as states relinquish their authorities, NCATE assumes a national role in teacher licensure. For example, in several states licensure depends on NCATE accreditation. In Alaska, Arkansas, Maryland and North Carolina the government has mandated that all institutions preparing teachers must be NCATE accredited, and four other states, West Virginia, Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina require NCATE accreditation for all state supported institutions. Finally, Arkansas, Hawaii, Ohio and Washington have turned their institutional review function wholly over to NCATE.

But the reality that there are at least three bodies charged with the accreditation of teachers suggests at least two things. First, these organizations have first to compete amongst themselves for the assumption of legitimacy. That is, why would any school choose any single body for accreditation. Johnson suggest that NCATE at least has devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy promoting itself as a product, or ‘name-brand.’ Offering products for sale with NCATE’s logo, affiliating itself with *Newsweek*, permits NCATE to assume a virtue, if it have not one.

An NCATE visit, the campus euphemism for the entire process of seeking accreditation from this body, is a “two or three year experience” (77). First, the campus announces an intention to apply for accreditation, and begins to prepare documentation “showing compliance with a number of NCATE preconditions.” (77). These preconditions, which may take up to a full year to document, include such things as “letters of organization authority for teacher preparation, job descriptions, written institutional policies and procedures, an elaborate conceptual framework document, a rather complex assessment system, student admission criteria, assurance of state approval of the program, program reports to Special Program Associations (SPAs for each program, and documentation of regional accreditation of the program” (77). That is, before NCATE will schedule a campus assessment visit, the program must prove that it already has credibility from a variety of agencies: usually the state, a regional accrediting body (Northeast Central etc.), and associations for specific disciplines. If NCATE agrees that this documentation warrants candidacy, then the institution must document compliance with each of NCATE’s six standards.

A local committee is then formed to carry out all of the tasks necessary to document compliance with each of the standards. This is an enormously expensive and time consuming task. NCATE and its advocates argue that this is a learning experience for faculty and institutions, but I think there are better uses of faculty time. Two or three years after the process has begun, NCATE examiners arrive on campus for a five day inspection. “Their job is to make a firsthand determination of whether the information in the institutional report is accurate, and the institution is in compliance with NCATE standards” (79). It would seem to me that such approval represents a redundancy: the institutions have already been approved by a variety of agencies before NCATE is invited to give its ultimate stamp of approval. “How many times must the cannon balls fly, before they’re forever banned?” Colleges and universities received accreditation from their regional agencies, and special professional organizations issue their own standards are met. Finally, state agencies, like the Department of Public Instruction here in Wisconsin, also accredit institutions with teacher education programs. NCATE is an expensive redundancy, and motives for seeking it must be questioned. Clearly, NCATE holds that something must be rotten in the state of Denmark, though it seems to me that it is its own dead body we would nose as we go up the stairs.

## 7

The Rabbis of the Talmud are wonderful exegetes. They ask many questions. When they read, they wonder. One earnest Rabbi desires to know: In *Exodus* 18:20, God says to Moses, “And you shall make known to [the people] the path in which they should go and *the deeds that they should do*.” What, the Rabbi asks, is the meaning of the redundancy? What is the difference between ‘the path in which the people should go’ and ‘the deeds that they should do?’ And I think the answer the Rabbis offer speaks to our condition today in the public schools and in the schools of education. The Rabbis

answer: The deeds that they should do refers not to the law—that is addressed by ‘the path in which the people should go.’ The laws are to be followed. Rather, ‘the deeds that they should do’ refers to the necessity of going *beyond the law*. To act in an ethical manner is to be obliged to go beyond the law. That is, one expects that the minimum will be standard behavior, but we are to be measured by how far we go beyond the law! It is said that Jerusalem (70 C.E.) was destroyed because the people only obeyed the law and did not go beyond it. If we want to end the siege, we must ourselves act.

How far must one go beyond the law? Of those things for which there are no prescribed measures (*Pe’ah* 1:1), three are here relevant: leaving crops at the corner of the field for the poor, doing deeds of lovingkindness, and studying Torah. Practice and study have no measure. Standards are of little value if we are always obliged to go beyond them. If there is no prescribed measure of study, then the curriculum of our schools is defined: it is continuous study.

What then should we study in the schools and the schools of education? In Tractate *Shabbat* (30b) the Rabbis wonder, what is meant by “matters of learning.” In response, they offer a story. Rabbi Gamaliel lectured, but his student complained: why do you make us learn when we read in *Ecclesiastes* that “There is nothing new under the sun.” And Gamaliel took the student out into the world and showed him that everyday there is something new under the sun if only one would see with renewed eyes. There are matters to be learned all about us. As Reb Thoreau notes, “The sun is only a morning star.” Matters of learning lead always to the future and therefore, they are never not new. Nor are they restricted to school hours or school standards. As E.D. Hirsch would have us acknowledge that there is nothing new under the sun, so NCATE and all its competitors would oblige us engaged in education to fail in our purpose. We would do well not to answer fools according to their follies.

## Endnotes

1. “Do we have to know that for the test?” “Is that going to be on the test.” Knowledge is what can be tested; knowledge is what is on the test. The rest, as Horatio stated, is silence.
2. A quick search on Barnes & Noble.com shows a series of books entitled “What Your Kindergartner Needs to know.” There are texts for every grade up through at least sixth year. There is also “The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (2002).
3. Dewey always referred to Francis Parker as the father of progressive education. Francis Parker does not appear in Hirsch’s index.
4. Gerald W. Bracey in a number of publications and regular postings on EDDRA calls into questions the reliability and validity of such standardized tests as PIRLS, TIMMS, NAEP, SAT and ACT, and debunks the conclusions drawn from the scores. A tip of the scholar’s hat goes to this brave scholar.

5. Bracey (2006,, 137) points out that 'average' is a statistic, but 'mediocre' is a judgment. School critics employ the latter term to measure the former.
6. Of course, what with the recent scandal in Congress, we might also wonder, "Citizens, do you know who is writing your laws?"
7. We must remember that NCATE consists of flawed human occupying ideological positions.
8. Nash et al. show that such controversies have existed almost from the outset. Indeed, the controversy over the history of the American Revolution was so intense that "By the mid-1790's . . . Americans could not celebrate the Fourth of July together" (2003, 19).
9. Iatrogenic refers to an infection or complication caused in a patient by the words or actions of a physician.
10. This is the title of the book (1995) by David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, and subtitled, "Myths, Fraud, and the Attack of America's Public Schools." For these authors, the siege of America's schools, like the recent war in Iraq, is undertaken with falsified, dubious, and erroneous evidence. The casualties of this attack are serious.
11. It interests me to consider that if the schools are, in fact, in decline, then this has occurred during the Republican regime, since the 1990s was a successful decade for American businesses and culture and by their own reasoning, the affluence and success of American capitalism must be ascribed to the educational system.
12. I am old enough to remember how in 1957, when the Russians launched Sputnik I, politicians and policy makers decried the sorry state of American education that permitted the Russians to accomplish this feat ahead of us. Monies were immediately appropriated to math and science education, and one decade later, the space program put a man on the moon. No one gave a teacher credit. The sorry state of the economy during the 1980's was also attributed to the state of education, but the boon of the 1990's was ascribed to the politicians. Not a word of thanks to the teachers.
13. I am reminded of Dylan's *Love Minus Zero/No Limit*: "My love winks, she does not bother/She knows too much to argue or to judge

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