

problem solving

race

+

mental hygiene

+

critical thinking

+

diversity awareness

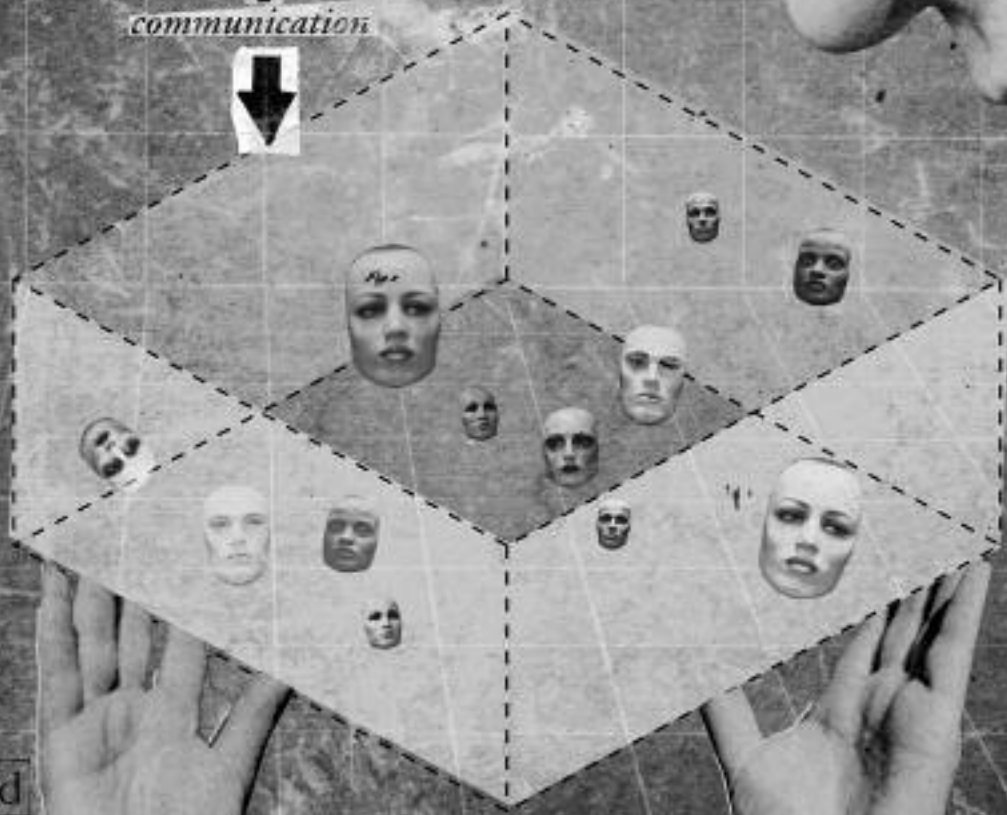
class

+

sexual orientation

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communication



Return of the Thought Police?

The history
of teacher
attitude
adjustment

College campus battles over academic freedom and free speech have become a media staple. One widely publicized 2004 case concerned Ed Swan, an education student at Washington State University (WSU), who openly espoused conservative views, including opposition to affirmative action and permitting gays to adopt. The school's "professional disposition evaluation" required that students demonstrate, along with a professional demeanor, written communication, and problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, an "understanding of the complexities of race, power, gender, class, sexual orientation and privilege in American society."

Refusing to consent to the underlying ideology, Swan failed repeatedly. The college threatened to expel him from the teacher training program unless he signed a contract agreeing to undergo diversity training and accept extra scrutiny of his student teaching. After a national civil-liberties group intervened on his behalf, Swan was allowed to continue in the program, and WSU has since revised its evaluation form. The new version requires professors to evaluate students' "willingness to consider multiple perspectives on social and institutional factors that can impede or enhance students' learning." Dean of Education Judy Mitchell explained, "We've changed the format and clarified the words, but we haven't changed the standards."

BY LAURIE MOSES HINES

Advocates of dispositions assessments of the kind in place at WSU defend the screening of pre-service teachers, whether at program entry or later on in the certification process, as standard practice and argue that “dispositions” are merely those attitudes and behaviors necessary to successful teaching. Critics see the combination of program accreditation standards, revised by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 2000; a growing curricular emphasis on “social justice” issues; and a left-leaning education professoriate as yielding a one-sided approach to teacher education and the certification of teachers based on ideology, rather than teaching skills or mastery of content knowledge.

As a historian, I am most struck by the parallels between the dispositions assessments of today’s aspiring teachers and the evaluations of teachers’ mental hygiene and personality that began in the 1940s and continued for two decades. As is the case today, from 1940 to 1960 teacher educators sought to protect the interests of schoolchildren by socially engineering “desirable” characteristics in their teachers. What have changed are the personal qualities deemed most important for success in the classroom.

Assessing Teacher Dispositions

What is the purpose of dispositions assessment? What entity or body is in the best position to make this assessment? If the purpose is to ensure that access to children is denied to those who are truly deviant (sexual predators) or those who could harm children (drug dealers, felony offenders, child abusers), then it seems the assessment is best made by the government, which has the resources and responsibility to identify these people. If the purpose is to ensure that potential teachers have basic characteristics like honesty or fairness, existing standards such as university honor codes in higher education should suffice. If the purpose is to see how a teacher acts in a certain environment (be it an urban, suburban, or rural school, with a diverse or homogeneous student body), then perhaps those in that environment can best perform that assessment, taking into account the standards, mores, and preferences of the community. The ultimate employers of teachers, local school districts, can and do screen for the characteristics they want in their employees. Why,



The harshest critics of dispositions assessment accuse education schools of acting as ideological gatekeepers to employment in public schools.

then, is it also necessary for teacher educators to assess the personal and political beliefs of aspiring teachers? Perhaps the policing of teacher personality and dispositions is just a way for teacher educators to extend their control even further into the public school classroom.

The harshest critics of dispositions assessment accuse education schools of acting as ideological gatekeepers to employment in public schools. Indeed, web site after web site shows schools of education that list among their teacher-education program goals the inculcation of political views alongside intellectual curiosity and such work habits as punctuality. The University of Alabama’s College of Education is “committed to preparing individuals to promote social justice, to be change agents, and to recognize individual and institutional racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism. . . .” In the teacher education program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, students are asked to “act as leaders and agents for organizational change in their classrooms, schools, and society. . . continually examine their own identities, biases, and social locations, seeking knowledge of students’ cultures and communities, and pursuing a complex understanding of societal inequities as mediated through classism, heterosexism, racism, and other systems of advantage.” Some program descriptions

explain that requiring awareness of these issues and a commitment to addressing them ensures teachers will teach *all* children. In an October 2006 letter defending the conceptual framework of Teachers College, Columbia University, against accusations of political screening, President Susan H. Furchman wrote, “We believe that responsiveness to the diversity of students’ backgrounds and previous experiences are [sic] essential for effective teaching” (see Figure 1).

Not all universities make the leap from classroom behavior to ideology: The “Teacher Education Professional Dispositions and Skills Criteria” at Winthrop University in South Carolina are only basic indicators of professional commitment, communication skills, interpersonal skills (among them, “Shows sensitivity to all students and is committed to teaching all students”), emotional maturity, and academic integrity; acknowledging social inequities is not mentioned. The difficulty, however, in assessing dispositions, whether they espouse

social justice or are seemingly harmless as at Winthrop, arises when the assessors make value judgments rather than encourage academic freedom and respect freedom of conscience. As the Swan case at Washington State University shows, some teacher education programs clearly demand allegiance to a particular perspective on the politics of education.

If schools encourage students to respond honestly to teacher education assignments, and then use any responses that differ from accepted beliefs as grounds for dismissal, that is political screening and a clear denial of academic freedom. A student accused Le Moyne College, a private, Jesuit-run school, of doing just that. In 2004, administrators dismissed the politically conservative graduate student after he wrote a paper on classroom management that questioned the value of multicultural education and expressed limited support for the use of corporal punishment in the classroom. At the Brooklyn College School of Education, some students complained after a teacher showed the Michael Moore film *Fahrenheit 9/11* on the day before the 2004 presidential election. The university asked one student to leave, accused two others of plagiarism, and then denied the two students the right to bring a witness or an attorney to their hearing. K. C. Johnson, a faculty member who questioned the accusation of plagiarism and defended the

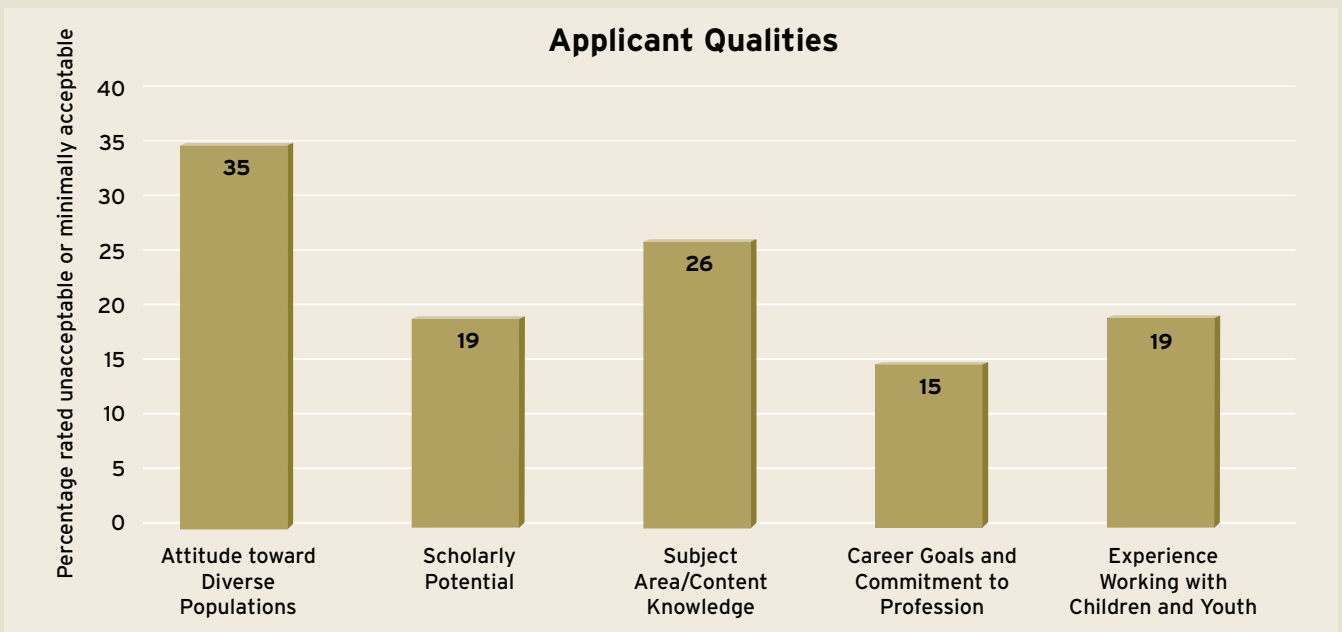
students in *Inside Higher Ed*, then faced possible investigation by the university. The hallmarks of a professional program of teacher preparation within a university should be the free exploration of ideas. Yet it seems some teacher preparation programs substitute professional socialization, and the political conformity it requires, for a commitment to academic freedom.

The controversy over political screening of prospective teachers by teacher educators came to a head at the June 2006 reauthorization hearing for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) with the U.S. Department of Education. Within the list of dispositions aspiring teachers might be required to possess, the agency had included “social justice,” a phrase that, to many, signals a value-laden ideology. Under pressure from a number of groups, NCATE president Arthur Wise announced that the agency would drop “social justice” from its accreditation standards; he maintains that social justice was never a required disposition.

NCATE’s definition of “dispositions” and its inclusion of social justice as part of that definition had caused considerable consternation. Among the groups represented at the hearing were the National Association of Scholars, which had filed the complaint, and the Foundation for Individual Rights

High Standards—on Attitudes, at Least (Figure 1)

In a 2004 review of applicants to its teacher education programs, Teachers College, Columbia University, found a greater proportion wanting in commitment to diversity than in any other assessed quality.



SOURCE: Teachers College Accreditation Team, “Institutional Report: Prepared for NCATE Board of Examiners Visit, April 2–6, 2005”

in Education (FIRE), founded and headed by civil libertarians Alan Charles Kors, professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvey Silverglate, a criminal defense attorney. FIRE, an organization dedicated to the preservation of free speech, has accused a number of universities, including Washington State University on behalf of Edward Swan, of evaluating students on the basis of their political views and thereby violating their First Amendment rights.

Arthur Wise has staked out NCATE's position that dispositions are only "commonsense expectations" for teacher behavior and insists that the accrediting agency does not condone the evaluation of attitudes. Whether or not that is the case, most teacher education programs in this country receive accreditation from NCATE and follow its lead. Even though NCATE has now dropped "social justice" as a disposition, the agency stands behind dispositions assessment and institutions' use of "social justice" as a curricular theme. The phrase appears in countless teacher-preparation program and course descriptions. Critics are not hopeful that NCATE's action will curb abuses. In her testimony at the NCATE hearing, American Council of Trustees and Alumni president Anne D. Neal asked that the agency's reauthorization be denied "until it affirmatively makes clear that teacher preparation programs are not expected to judge the values and political beliefs of teacher candidates and asks that its members review and revise their standards accordingly."

Judging Fitness Is Nothing New

Society has long been concerned with the behavior, both inside and outside of the classroom, and the character of public school teachers. A century ago, local school boards carefully selected school teachers they deemed "fit to teach," whose behavior comported with community values. They could not smoke or drink. Female teachers could not socialize with men while unchaperoned. They could not marry. They were not to display or engage in behaviors considered deviant, such as lesbianism. They were to dress conservatively and attend church. Violation could cost a teacher her job.



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School officials and boards also scrutinized teachers' political views. During World War I, the superintendent of the Cleveland public schools suggested firing those teachers sympathetic to Germany, and anti-war teachers did lose their jobs in New York City. In the 1920s and 1930s, more than a dozen states, typically those in which there were anti-communist crusades, required teachers to take loyalty oaths.

In public-school classrooms, as educational progressivism steadily gained influence during the first half of the 20th century, the focus in classrooms gradually shifted from rigorous academic study and discipline to children's personality development and mental health. Education historian Sol Cohen describes the "medicalization" of education as the "infiltration of psychiatric norms, concepts and categories of discourse" into American education. Cohen reports that by 1950, there was "a national consensus on the role of personality development in American education" and that this included the view that "the school is basically an institution to develop children's personality and that personality development of children should take priority over any other school objective."

Attention turned as well toward the "mental hygiene" of the teacher, whose actions and attitudes would no doubt influence the children in her charge. As Douglas Spencer, instructor of psychological counseling at Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote in 1938, the teacher was to "demonstrate in her own personality adjustment sound mental health and emotional maturity." As the 1940s began, a growing chorus of educators called for teacher qualification and selection to be based on mental health, first and foremost, and many expected this to be achieved through the teacher education process. However, market pressures on teacher education institutions made this problematic. Government policies provided tax funds for training teachers through the publicly supported teachers colleges, which did not have selective admissions requirements. Meanwhile, the number of both school-age children and college attendees grew steadily, with more than one-quarter of college degrees being granted in the field of education.

The rapid expansion of the teaching workforce hindered efforts to select teachers on mental hygienic grounds, even before the teacher shortage that developed in the 1950s. Reports of teachers with mental disturbances and even mental illnesses made professional and public headlines throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Public concern grew about maladjusted or neurotic teachers and their inability to ensure the proper psychological development of the children under their tutelage. Some feared that, as with contagious disease, psychological disorders would spread from teacher to child. Various personality traits of the maladjusted teacher emerged in the literature of the time. Shy, nervous, timid, easily excitable, disorganized, irresponsible, introverted, sexually repressed, or hot-tempered teachers were considered unfit for the classroom. A 1961 text, *The Mentally Disturbed Teacher*, documented purportedly true incidents about such teachers, suggesting that teachers who used corporal punishment could be mentally ill or that irritability in a teacher may be a sign of alcoholism, to take two examples. One suggestion for improving the mental health of the teaching body was for schools to keep a record of the teacher's "attainments and attitudes," including her cultural background and her community leadership.

As early as the 1940s, teacher education institutions began to use rating scales, placement tests, and personal interviews as screening devices for measuring mental hygiene and teacher personality. For some assessments, candidates filled out questionnaires; for others, faculty, administrators, or psychologists observed the teacher and made judgments. The University of Utah required teacher candidates to take the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the Strong Vocational Interest Blank. The College of Education at the State College of Washington used the Minnesota Teacher Attitude Inventory. Still other institutions employed a variety of assessment measures, such as the Rorschach test, James Cattell's 16 Factor Personality test, the Guilford-Zimmerman Temperament Survey, the Thurstone Temperament Schedule, and a host of other batteries designed to explore the teacher's behavior, personality, and attitude.

In 1953, Ruth A. Stout, director of field programs at Kansas State Teachers Association and later professor of education at



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Teachers College, Columbia University, completed a comprehensive study of admission practices in teacher education institutions. Stout surveyed 785 of 865 accredited teacher-training schools and found that a majority identified emotional stability as being of primary importance and that approximately 45 percent actually assessed students' emotional stability, identifying it as the second most important criterion for determining fitness for teaching, behind academic credentials. Assessment of emotional stability became more important, Stout reported, as students progressed through their teaching preparation, with more institutions using it to determine admission to student teaching than to the teacher education program.

Research on Teacher Personality

Experimental and statistical research on personality development exploded onto the 1940s education scene, replacing earlier anecdotal surveys. The *Journal of Experimental Education* and the *Journal of Educational Research* published much of this research, which used psychological or personality indexes to "scientifically" determine the relationship between personality and "good teaching." The ultimate goal was to connect personal traits with teaching effectiveness, thus enabling better selection of teacher candidates.

Sometimes, researchers measured teacher success based on the observation of classroom supervisors. At other times, they used data on students' class rank, college grades, or other measures of student performance.

The results of the research were as diverse as the assessment instruments used. Some found good teachers were more gregarious, adventurous, frivolous, artistic, polished, cheerful, kind, and interested in the opposite sex than teachers rated poorer in performance. Others found good teachers to be those whose attitudes were positive toward children and administrators. A few studies that tried to correlate teacher factors (both intelligence and personality) with effectiveness found teaching too complex to be influenced by any one or two factors. Nonetheless, institutions pushed forward with the use of personality tests to select among teacher candidates, often using

multiple indexes, even as critics warned that some instruments had low predictive validity, that there was inconsistency in results, or that the lack of replication warranted cautious use.

In a 1956 review of the research on “School Personnel and Mental Health,” J. T. Hunt, a professor at the University of North Carolina, noted that “efforts to identify personality differences between superior and inferior school personnel, to isolate a ‘teacher personality,’ or to predict either competence or effectiveness of student teachers by means of psychometric or projective instruments, led to limited results.” Unlike most of the research he reviewed, Hunt recognized that personality was not a monolithic attribute, as there were many kinds and types of teacher personalities and roles. More presciently, Hunt called for research that would consider the “varying value standards of judges.” “Very little attention seems to have been paid,” he concluded, “to the actual attitudes and expectations of persons” who assess teachers. He called for research that placed university administrators under the personality microscope.

University of Chicago professors Jacob Warren Getzels and P. W. Jackson in 1960 followed Berkeley professor Fred Tyler’s lead in arguing that no consensus existed among researchers, and presumably educators generally, as to what was considered good teaching. Getzels and Jackson pointed out that the authoritarian teaching style considered “good” at the end of the 19th century had given way to the personal style brought into vogue with progressive education, which would in time give way to another. Without definitive criteria for good teaching, the personality indexes used in teacher personality research had no validity. The tests, they claimed, were chosen for “irrelevant reason” or for “no apparent reason at all.” Thus, the entire design of research on teacher personality was flawed.

Mental Hygiene as Curriculum

The mental hygiene perspective nonetheless held sway throughout the 1950s, and the concept of personality became as important in teacher education as academic and technical preparation for the classroom—as important as content knowledge and skills. The separation of the teacher into “technician” and “personality,” a distinction noted by mental hygienist Harry Rivlin



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in 1955, required that teacher education prepare students along both lines. Teacher educators often prioritized personality over other aspects of a teacher’s abilities.

In 1955, Percival Symonds, professor at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he taught mental hygiene, headed a study publicized by the Council for Research in the Social Sciences of Columbia University. His study recommended “a change in emphasis in teacher-training from intellectual courses to experiences for the better personal adjustment of teachers.” For a decade, Symonds had promoted the inclusion of psychotherapeutic principles and methods in the mental hygienic treatment of teacher maladjustment. He used psychotherapy in his classes; his students wrote autobiographies and he analyzed them. As he noted in a *Newsweek* article, he “first gained the pupil’s confidence to a point where they would feel free enough to drag all the family skeletons out of the closet”; of course, he found maladjustment everywhere. According to a 1955 *Education* article by Leon Mones, then an assistant superintendent in Newark, New Jersey, and a former principal, Symonds and others were openly advocating that the emotional life of the teacher become the focus of teacher preparation, since “it is the teacher’s personality that is the tool with which he works rather than the content in which he gives instruction.”

Educational psychology courses aimed at understanding children were standard fare for teacher preparation in the 1920s. But even by the mid-1940s, the goal of psychology coursework had become the teacher’s own mental health. Bank Street College of Education in New York, San Francisco State College, the University of Texas, and the University of Wisconsin incorporated lectures on mental health with “psychiatrically supervised individual guidance” of pre-service teachers. The experimental use of psychoanalysis in teacher education even received funding from the National Institute of Mental Health.

At Bank Street College, teacher educator and director of research Barbara Biber extolled the virtues of a program that applied “the concept of the unified nature of cognitive and affective development...on the teacher-training level” and was based on “a process of integrating new knowledge with an old

self.” Bank Street faculty members looked for certain dispositions in their candidates: relatedness to children, an orientation to the psychology of growth, their relation to authority, their emotional strength, and their motivation. The Institute for Child Study at the University of Maryland emphasized the ideal of the “self-actualized individual” in its graduate-level instruction. A human relations seminar at the Merrill-Palmer School aimed “to help the individual teacher express and explore the values, meanings, and dynamics of personal and professional experiences, to achieve self-awareness, and to develop sensitive, understanding, responsive attitudes.”

Still, psychiatrists reported that teachers, especially novices, did not know how to handle their negative feelings. I. N. Berlin, a professor of psychiatry and psychiatric consultant to school districts in San Francisco, San Joaquin County, and Stockton, California, argued that some mental pathologies that were causal factors in teacher maladjustment and ineffectiveness in the classroom were, unfortunately, exacerbated rather than alleviated by teacher education. Berlin’s criticism of teacher training reflected the belief of some psychiatrists that there were limits to teacher education’s ability to ensure mentally healthy teachers.

Learning from History

The screening of prospective teachers for maladjustment 50 years ago and the dispositions assessments going on today have remarkable similarities. As William Damon of Stanford has noted, dispositions assessment “opens virtually all of a candidate’s thoughts and actions to scrutiny...[and] brings under the examiner’s purview a key element of the candidate’s very *personality*.” The same underlying assumption—that scientific means of selection and training could guarantee good teachers—held sway at mid-century with respect to mental hygiene. Teacher educators who guarded entry to the profession used the techniques of science to study, measure, and evaluate the teacher candidate as do those who guard entry today. Only the specific values and attitudes they appraise have changed. Advocates of dispositions assessment claim that their methods are “standards-based” and provide



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“accountability”—scientific-sounding catchwords that hold considerable weight in the current political climate. Both sets of desirable characteristics—summed up in the terms mental hygiene and social justice—are tied to progressivism and appear as core components of the teacher preparation curriculum, with the effect of deemphasizing academic knowledge, or at least requiring subject-matter learning and even pedagogy to make room for them. And hard evidence was and still is lacking. Researchers could never link with any certainty particular personality traits with effective teaching. Nor, as Frederick Hess explains, is there any scientific evidence that requiring teachers to have certain views about “sexuality or social class” ensures that they teach all students: “Screening on ‘dispositions’ serves primarily to cloak academia’s biases in the garb of professional necessity.”

The history of teacher screening reveals how deeply rooted such practices are in American teacher education. Whether the standard is mental hygiene or possessing the proper political and ideological disposition, the elimination of candidates who do not pass muster gives teacher educators the power to determine who gains access to a classroom based on the values the teacher educators prefer. While the courts have permitted certifying agencies to require “good moral character” of teacher applicants, as legal scholars Martha McCarthy and Nelda

Cambron-McCabe note, they “will intervene...if statutory or constitutional rights are abridged.” Thus, while pledging loyalty to federal and state constitutions is a permissible condition for obtaining a teacher license, swearing an oath to progressivism is not. Given the evidence and the history, there should be real concern, as teacher educator Gary Galluzzo has said, that “students’ views and personalities are being used against them” whenever dispositions are assessed. Those committed to academic freedom within higher education should be concerned when professional socialization trumps freedom of conscience in teacher education programs.

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