

Obama, Education, and the "Social Justice Left"

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By choosing Arnie Duncan as secretary of education, Obama has apparently sidestepped the zero-sum game between teacher's unions and education reformers. During his tenure as CEO of Chicago schools, Duncan had managed to stay popular with the Chicago Teacher's Union despite his support for standardized testing and merit pay. Early November, reform-minded Obama supporters expressed concern when Obama chose Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond to lead his education advisory team. Newsweek identified her as "a favorite of the unions" who reformers view as "anti-accountability" due to her opposition to standardized testing and merit pay (11/22/08). The Huffington Post, the American Prospect, and the Washington Post echoed these concerns (11/10/08, 11/19/08, 11/26/08). Philanthropist and board member of "Democrats for Education Reform" Whitney Tilson described Darling-Hammond as "about as bad as it gets in terms of education reform" on his education reform blog (12/12/07). Though quite pleased with the selection of reform-friendly Duncan, Tilson is concerned that the Obama team might chose to "throw her (and the unions) a bone" by making Darling-Hammond Deputy secretary (12/15/08).

Missing from this discussion are aspects of Darling-Hammond's teaching philosophy that most Americans would find highly objectionable. In his blog "Global Labor and Politics," political scientist Steve Diamond blames professors like Darling-Hammond, ex-weatherman William Ayers, and other members of what he calls "the social justice left" for the "race-driven identity politics" that now dominates many teacher's colleges at the expense of the original goal of "color-blindness that used to drive the alliance between labor and civil rights" (11/29/08). Even though Diamond identifies with the left, he believes that professors like Ayers and Darling-Hammond betray original progressive ideas of freedom and justice by using their positions as "platforms for advocating radical authoritarian politics" (10/15/08). Diamond concentrates most his attention on the influence of Ayers on Obama and believes that the ex-weatherman recommended Darling-Hammond to the Obama team (12/15/08). While much of the Obama/Ayers relationship is still open to debate, the educational goals of Darling-Hammond (and their similarity to those of Bill Ayers) are crystal clear to anyone who reads beyond the toned-down rhetoric that she uses on general audiences. Sadly, these ideas prevail in what are regarded as America's "elite" schools of education.

In one of her most recent books "Powerful Teacher Education" (2006), Darling-Hammond compiles experiences from what she regards as "exemplary" education programs in seven colleges and universities. The teaching of "social justice," multiculturalism, "critical" pedagogy, "liberating" pedagogy, and the use of "constructivist" techniques are recurring themes in chapter 8. Most Americans who are not familiar with education theory may not find these ideas particularly alarming: Almost everyone wants social justice. Multiculturalism may seem a bit touchy-feely. As for the pedagogy-related jargon, this is when most people's eyes start to glaze over. Hence, for the uninitiated who care about education I have incorporated brief explanations into my critique.

One of the leading influences on the teaching of "social justice" is Paulo Freire, whose "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970) has been characterized by Sol Stern as the "Bible" of the critical pedagogy movement. According to Freire's "banking" theory of education, teachers "deposit" propaganda into the minds of passive students in order to "adapt" them to the world of oppression. In contrast, "liberating" education raises critical consciousness against the oppression by way of student-teacher dialogue, or "dialogics" (Chapters 2 & 3). For Stern, critical pedagogy presents a "rancorous view of America in which it is always two minutes to midnight as a knock at the door by the thought police is imminent" (City Paper, Summer 2006).

"Constructivism" refers to a learner-centered (as opposed to subject-centered) approach to education whereby children are provided with the context that allows them to "discover" the information and use it to "construct" their own version of reality. This subjectivist approach to education has merits, but it is often misused by multiculturalists and critical pedagogues to de-emphasize the traditional curriculum, which they regard as a "subtractive" form of education that undermines the cultural identity of marginalized groups. In Alverno College, prospective students are instructed to "make material fit with the students rather than asking the students to fit with the material" (p 235). Echoing Freire's dialectical approach to education, University of Virginia's Margo Figgins promotes "instruction methods which result in students' cultural production (as opposed to reproduction)" (p 238). Consequently, Darling-Hammond does not think it is enough for future teachers to take only one class in diversity. She favors instead an "integrated" approach whereby multiculturalism is injected into all coursework (p 235).

Many courses are highly politicized and openly promote Marxist or Marxist-inspired ideas. "Teaching Literacy" by Freire and Macedo and the Freire-inspired "Unquiet Pedagogy" by Kutz and Roskelly make up part of the texts used by Margo Figgins, who regards teaching as a "political and critical act" (p 237). Harriet Cuffaro of Bank Street College assigns George Count's Soviet-inspired "Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order" (1932). Students are then asked "What's the challenge? How do you feel about accepting it?" (p 240). Since all of these schools regard teachers as "moral change agents" (p 238), it is unlikely that either Cuffaro or Darling-Hammond regard teachers taking up this challenge as having overstepped their mandate.

In "Skewed Perspectives: What we know about teacher preparation at elite education schools" (Education Next Winter 2005), David Steiner responds to critics of an earlier study where he found overwhelming evidence of political bias in syllabi from some of the top education schools in the nation. Based on his study of 16 schools, the books most often required were authored by Anita Woolfolk, Jonathan Kozol, Henry Giroux, Paulo Freire, Joel Spring, Howard Gardner, and John Dewey. Freire, Kozol, Giroux and Spring are critical pedagogues. Woolfolk and Dewey belong to the constructivist camp. Gardner authored the theory of multiple intelligences which has been used by progressive educators as a means to boost self-esteem among children who are not academically gifted. Unfortunately, this theory is sometimes used to downplay the importance of academic skills. Out of 45 syllabi on foundations of education, only 3 contained books by theorists who question the effectiveness of constructivist techniques, namely E.D. Hirsch and Diane Ravitch. The harshest critic of Steiner's research was Stanford professor Darling-Hammond, who denounced it as a "diatribe" based on "political and personal standards." Steiner notes that the Stanford website list of books also draws almost exclusively from progressive American authors, with all but

one having been written in the last 30 years. Among them is Gloria Ladson-Billings, a proponent of "critical race theory," a form of critical pedagogy based on the "pervasiveness" of white supremacy.

Whitney Tilson sees Darling-Hammond as an impediment to education reform mainly because of her silence on what he regards as the core problems in American education: "awful bureaucracies, skewed incentives, little accountability, and powerful, entrenched interests defending it" (12/12/07). For example, Tilson notes that when asked how competition might improve the quality of schools, Darling-Hammond ignores the unprecedented success that charter schools like KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools have with underprivileged children. Instead, she replies "Competition does not always breed quality...in many states the charter schools are doing less well than the regular public schools. On the other hand I do think that creating good school models does show people that it is possible to break out of the mold" (The Almanac 5/30/01). So what is Darling-Hammond's idea of a good school model? In a report she co-authored with George Wood on behalf of the Forum for Education and Democracy she describes one such school on page 37 (Democracy at Risk: The Need for a New Federal Policy on Education 4/23/08).

Located in San Francisco, the June Jordan School for Social Equity serves low-income students of color who are at risk of dropping out of school. JJSE's curriculum is centered on "social justice issues" and corresponding coursework list can be found on JJSE's website. The two honors English classes offered are "Immigration and Assimilation" and "Banned Books." In the first class, students weigh the advantages and disadvantages of "assimilating or rejecting the dominant middle class culture." In the second class they discuss writings "that challenge social norms of the community." The only other English classes in the catalogue are the constructivist "Literature Circles," whereby students choose their own reading material and discuss it in small groups. In order to advance beyond the 10th grade students must submit yearly "portfolios" of their work, culminating in a "performance assessment" that Darling-Hammond describes as "rigorous, authentic, and intellectually challenging." To her dismay, the school district does not recognize JJSE's performance assessment system and JJSE "has been consistently required to defend its right to make educational decisions." Darling-Hammond attributes this to the school district's "limited" view of curriculum, but what she does not tell you is how JJSE students score on standardized tests.

Based on the School Accountability Report Card for the year 2006-2007 published by the San Francisco Unified School District, 88% of African Americans graduating from JJSE were not proficient in English-Language Arts or Mathematics. In other words, even though the JJSE website proudly announces that many of JJSE's teachers have degrees from Stanford, Berkeley, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and Brown, almost 90% of its African American seniors cannot pass the California High School Exit Exam. It appears that the only thing that JJSE clearly does well is comply with Linda Darling-Hammond's teaching philosophy. This leaves little wonder as to why she is such a rabid opponent of standardized testing. Since the school is only five years old it is too early to know how many of the over 70% JJSE graduates accepted into four year colleges actually finish college, but given the high cost of college tuition there is little excuse for not gathering this information. To knowingly or unknowingly send under-prepared high graduates to college is neither equitable nor socially just.

Clearly, Darling-Hammond is more ideologue than scholar. She ignores the success of charter schools like KIPP, Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools because their prescriptive approach to education -whereby middle class mores are reinforced and all aspects of street culture are suppressed- contradicts everything she supports. In an essay titled "Education for Democracy" Darling-Hammond contrasts "nurturing" forms of education with schooling that is "managed as a tedious and coercive activity" creating "frustrations that must emerge sooner or later in self-depreciation or cruelty to others." This may have been common a century ago, but current application of what David Whitman describes as the "new paternalism" in these successful charter schools demonstrates that nurturing and coercion can go hand-in-hand (Education Next 10/28/08). Since much of the education establishment concurs with Darling-Hammond in regarding this as heresy, her ideas are in a sense not so radical. That does not make them any less dangerous.

"Education for Democracy" is part of a collection of writings by progressive educators in a book edited by William Ayers and Janet Miller ("A Light in Dark Times: Maxine Greene and the Unfinished Conversation" 1998). Maxine Greene is a pioneer of the critical pedagogy movement in America and William Ayers studied under her at Columbia University. The relationship between Obama and Ayers officially spans from 1995 to 1999 with their involvement in the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. Despite Stanley Kurtz of the National Review having written a superb expose on the radical teacher's workshops financed by this \$150 million grant, the rest of the media yawned (10/14/08). Even FactCheck.org took the word of Education Week reporter Dakarai Aarons at face value when he said that the CAC "reflected mainstream thinking among education reformers" (10/10/08). Given what's going on in nearly all of America's top teaching colleges this "mainstream thinking" probably has little to do with main street America.

In the final analysis, the left's focus on Darling-Hammond's ties to teacher's unions may be as much a red herring as the right's emphasis on Ayer's terrorist past. As prominent members of the social justice left, they can potentially inflict far more lasting damage on American society if given the means to power. Furthermore, Obama's past role in implementing CAC policies proposed by Ayers as well as the presence of Darling-Hammond on his education team today raise questions about Obama's views on social justice education that none of his reform-minded supporters have bothered to bring up. It is no secret that Democrats for Education Reform lobbied aggressively to prevent Darling-Hammond's appointment to secretary of education. If the current choice was made only under pressure, then Obama administration may not provide the necessary support for the positive changes they have in mind. Education reformers and families who are at the mercy of the public school system should take heed.

Update: As you may already know, Tilson's aforementioned concern that Obama would "throw a bone" to Darling-Hammond was justified, but Arne Duncan was not much of an improvement. Darling-Hammond was to later play a key role in the formulation of Common Core. This was implemented with the blessing of Duncan, who dismissed concerns over the curriculum's left-wing bias as "[conspiracy theories](#)".

Link (in case the hypertext does not work):

<http://sfppr.org/2012/10/the-truth-about-common-core-2/>