5

Social Reconstruction Ideology

Educators who promote the Social Reconstruction ideology view curriculum from a social perspective. First, they assume that our society is unhealthy—indeed, that its very survival is threatened—because the traditional mechanisms developed by society to contend with social problems are incapable of doing their job. Second, Social Reconstructionists assume that something can be done to keep society from destroying itself. This assumption necessitates the development of a vision of a society better than the existing one, a society whose problems and conflicts have been resolved. It also requires action directed toward reconstruction of society based on that vision. Finally, Social Reconstruction educators assume that education provides the means of reconstructing society. They have faith in the ability of education, through the medium of curriculum, to educate "the masses of humanity" to critically analyze themselves in relation to their society, understand the ills of their society, develop a vision of a better world based on a conception of social justice, and actualize that vision.

Social Reconstructionists begin with the assumption that the survival of our society is threatened by many problems. These problems include, among others, racism, war, sexism, poverty, pollution, worker exploitation, global warming, crime, political corruption, population explosion, energy shortage, illiteracy, inadequate health care, and unemployment. Underlying many of these problems are deep social structures—many based in Eurocentric conceptions of knowledge, culture, and values—that through the school's hidden curriculum subtly shape student beliefs and behavior in such a way that they, as both students and future adults, will contribute to the continuation and worsening of these problems. If these problems are not resolved, they will threaten the survival of our society.

However, all is not lost. There are actions that can be taken to improve our situation and save society. As George Counts wrote in 1932, during the Great Depression,

> the point should be emphasized, that the present situation is full of promise, as well as menace. Our age is literally pregnant with possibilities. There lies within our grasp the most humane and majestic civilization ever fashioned by any people. At last men have achieved such a mastery over the forces of nature that wage slavery can follow chattel slavery and take its place among the relics of the past. No longer are there any grounds for the contention that the finer fruits of human culture must be nurtured upon the exploitation of the masses. The limits set by nature have been so extended that for all practical purposes we may say that we are bound merely by our own ideals, by our power of self-discipline, and by our ability to devise social arrangements suited to . . . [our] age. . . . In other words, we hold within our hands the power to usher in an age of plenty, to make secure the lives of all and to banish poverty forever from the land. (1932a, pp. 260–261)

To save society from self-destruction, we must develop a vision of a society better than the existing one, a vision of "the most humane and majestic civilization ever fashioned by any people" in which our present society's problems do not exist and in which social justice for all people prevails. Then we must reconstruct our society into the envisioned one "that extend[s] the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and freedom to the widest possible set of institution[s]" and people (Giroux, 2005, p. 74).

For Social Reconstructionists, education provides the means by which society is to be reconstructed. Counts and Giroux put it this way:

> Today, as social institutions crumble and society is shaken by deep convulsions that threaten its very existence, many persons are proclaiming that education provides the only true road to safety. They are even saying that it should be brought into the service of building a new social order. (Counts, 1934, p. 533)*

> Educators need to assume the role of leaders in the struggle for social and economic justice. . . . Educators must connect what they teach and write to the dynamics of public life . . . and . . . concern for . . . democracy. (Giroux, 2006, p. 9)

Social Reconstructionists assume that education, *if it is revitalized along the lines they recommend,* has the power to educate people to analyze and understand social problems, envision a world in which those problems do not exist, and act so as to bring that vision into existence. Thus, education of individuals in appropriately revitalized schools can lead to social transformation.

Social Reconstructionists hold diverse beliefs about society, its problems, and the vision for a better society, and therefore the particular beliefs of educators will not be specified here. Rather, the context within which the beliefs are held will be discussed. Whether the curriculum is designed around the oppression of poverty or illiteracy, the destructiveness of war or pollution, the social injustice of racism or sexism, the economic problems of worker exploitation or political corruption, or other such problems, the particular issues and visions will not be our concern. Our concern will be the assumptions that underlie Social Reconstructionists' views. To give the assumptions

---

*Reprinted with the permission of Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, from *The Social Foundations of Education* by George S. Counts. Copyright © 1934 by Charles Scribner's Sons; copyright renewed 1962 by Charles Scribner's Sons. All rights reserved.

meaning, two Social Reconstruction educational institutions will be described: an adult education school and a middle school mathematics classroom.

Highlander

The Highlander Folk School, founded by Myles Horton in 1932 on Monteagle Mountain in Tennessee, provides an example of the work of a Social Reconstructionist. The school was founded to stop an impending social crisis arising out of the industrial revolution: rich industrialists and landowners were economically exploiting and oppressing poor factory, farm, and mine workers to such an extent that democracy as Americans knew it was threatened. Horton founded the school to provide an educational "means by which all suppressed people in America could challenge their oppressors" (Adams, 1972, p. 516). The school's purpose was to "educat[e] for a revolution that would basically alter economic and political power relationships to the advantage of the poor and powerless" (Horton, 1936, p. 117). To accomplish this, Horton invited potential labor organizers to Highlander, helped them understand the nature of the oppression under which the workers of America were suffering, inspired them with a vision of an ideal society in which laborers were not oppressed, and helped them formulate strategies for organizing oppressed laborers. He then sent the labor organizers back to their factories, farms, and mines to organize the masses of oppressed workers to strike for better living and working conditions, and thus begin the establishment of a new social order. Horton believed "the Highlander Folk School's most important contribution [would] be to help the workers envision their [new] role in society and in so doing, make the labor movement the basis for a fundamental social change" (p. 118). Note that Horton assumed the existence of a social crisis that could be overcome: the economic exploitation of the working class. To overcome the social crisis, he used educational means: he educated labor leaders, who then educated the working class, both to envision a new society lacking economic exploitation and to act in ways that would transform the existing society into the envisioned new society. Crucial to Horton's educational program was his curriculum. Labor leaders educated via Horton's curriculum at Highlander used that same curriculum when they returned to their factories, farms, and mines to educate the masses of oppressed laborers.

The essence of Horton's curriculum consists of labor workshops that last for 6 weeks, during which about 25 potential labor leaders interact under the careful guidance of the Highlander staff. The labor workshops progress through three loosely structured, but carefully guided, stages of group discussion. During the first stage, participants "state and analyze their problems" in terms of their actual experiences and collectively paint a picture of a society in which such problems do not exist (Horton, 1966, p. 492). On the one hand, a feeling of commonality is established among strangers as they share their personal experiences with each other while developing an *understanding* of the social crisis. On the other hand, a feeling of shared hope arises as participants develop *a vision* of an ideal society that they might help construct in order to eradicate the problems of the existing society. At this stage, an understanding of society both "as it is" and "as it ought to be" is generated as Highlander staff help workshop participants reflect on their firsthand experiences with labor problems. This means that workshop participants are required to have had firsthand encounters with labor problems so that they can both contribute to the discussion from their own experienced perspectives and understand the experiences of others. Persons without the required experience are sent to participate in labor strikes and to live alongside exploited workers before they are allowed to join workshops.

During the second stage of workshops, participants discuss alternate strategies that might be used to eradicate society's problems and bring into existence an improved society. On the one hand, participants are guided to engage in "a lot of criticism, a lot of informal discussion . . . about how they've failed" and about "their inability to achieve what they want to achieve" in light of their vision of a better society (Horton, 1966, p. 492). This self-criticism allows for discussion of unsuccessful change strategies, gives workshop participants insight into their shortcomings as leaders, and frees participants from guilt over past failures. On the other hand, participants discuss each other's successes in working to overcome oppression and share possible new methods of acting as social groups to bring into existence the envisioned new society—such as massive strikes and sit-ins. During this workshop stage, Highlander "staff . . . deliberately reinforce talk in the group that points to united social action" versus individual action (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 213), deliberately draw solutions to social problems out of the experiences and thoughts of workshop participants rather than those of outside experts, and deliberately examine these solutions in terms of participants' firsthand experiences rather than judge them theoretically. Important here is that solutions come from the people and relate to the people, and that

> the search for solutions becomes, itself, a group process. Without saying so, Highlander provides an experience in group problem solving. The group stretches the imagination of every individual in it and becomes the vehicle for introducing the concept of collective power. (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 214)

(Here the social medium of group process complements the social message of collective power.)

During the third stage of workshops, participants are led to synthesize what they have learned and to commit themselves to action directed toward transforming the existing crisis-ridden society into the future *good society.* Commitment to action, strengthened through vows taken openly in front of colleagues, is central to this workshop stage. Participants commit to what they will do when they return home: both to educating their fellow workers in the same way they were educated at Highlander and to taking action that will help their fellow workers establish the envisioned good society. It is through workshop participants' going home to act that Horton disseminates his curriculum and uses it to educate "the masses," which make up society, to reconstruct society.

Three things occur at all stages of the labor workshops. First, Highlander staff act more as catalysts for and companions to workshop participants than as teachers or authorities. They communicate *with* participants rather than lecture *at* them or *about* them. Second, at no time does Horton present "a clearly defined program of action" for those coming to Highlander to mindlessly learn and then follow when they return home. He does not intend to teach such a program, for he believes that men must solve their problems in the context in which they arise. Horton does provide a value-laden vision of a new society and a method of deep reflection based on critical analysis of social forces that allows people to understand their problems, to have hope that they can be overcome, to plan ways of overcoming them, and to act to overcome them. Crucial here is that the particular action people must take depends on the specific time, place, and situation in which they find themselves—the value-laden vision *guides* their action but does not *dictate* their action. Third, in all three stages of the labor workshops, Highlander staff make heavy use of social media, such as group discussions, singing, storytelling, and drama, as a means of binding people together into social groups, leading them to see their problems clearly, helping them envision a new society, and inspiring them to action directed toward building a new social order. Scores of labor plays and songs, including "We Shall Overcome," were written or rewritten from earlier traditional folk versions at Highlander in its attempt "to develop feelings and will more than memory and logic" (Adams, 1972, p. 501). Education at Highlander is thoroughly social in nature. It uses the means of human interaction during discussion and song to educate and motivate, it promotes social rather than individual ways of acting (advocating massive strikes and sit-ins), and it educates people to improve society as a whole rather than themselves as individuals.

What Myles Horton did as a Social Reconstructionist in the 1930s and 1940s for the labor movement could be done at other times and in other places with different social crises. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, Horton devoted his efforts to the civil rights movement. The Citizenship Schools that sprang up throughout the South and the sit-ins of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were programs that originated at Highlander. Although the issues and times were different, the method, vision, and purpose were the same: using interactional workshops as a social means of "educating for a revolution that would basically alter economic and political power relationships to the advantage of the poor and powerless."

Sixth-Grade Social Reconstruction Mathematics

The mathematics instruction described here took place in middle school classrooms in a large urban public school and was reported in *Rethinking Mathematics* (Gutstein & Peterson, 2005). The goal was to teach mathematics in a way that would allow students—many of them poor or members of minorities—to use mathematics to help them notice social injustices in their world, analyze and understand these injustices, plan ways of righting the injustices, and take action to bring about a more just world.

Projects

Students worked on numerous projects, including the following (Gutstein, 2005, pp. 117–120):

- Saving Morningstar Park (save a park from a condo developer who wants to build a parking lot in its place)
- Environmental Hazards (clean up a neighborhood toxic waste site after exploring EPA data)
- School Overcrowding (measure school size and population and compare the results with the size and population of other schools and state recommendations for space per student)

- Liquor Store Distribution (compare the density of liquor stores in your urban neighborhood to the density of liquor stores in the suburbs)
- World Wealth Distribution (compare world wealth distribution to continental population)
- Cost of the Iraq War (compare war costs to the costs of providing shelter for everyone, removing land mines, eliminating illiteracy, and providing safe drinking water worldwide)
- Random Traffic Stops (analyze police data for racial profiling)

Instructional Procedures

The procedures used in teaching each project were similar. Issues to be explored arose from student concerns. Students participated in an initial discussion, during which issues and values were highlighted and concerns to be explored were identified. Students went on a field trip, engaged in a simulation, listened to a speaker, exchanged personal experiences, role-played, watched a movie, or in some way experienced the issue they were exploring in a manner that personally involved them in it and touched them intellectually and emotionally. The teacher introduced the mathematics that would help students collect and examine data related to the issue being investigated, and then students gathered and analyzed data using the mathematics introduced by the teacher. Referring to the results of their mathematical analyses, students held further discussion in an attempt to better understand the issues and to clarify their stance on them. As part of the discussion, students also attempted to understand themselves, the ways social institutions and issues liberated or enslaved them, and how they could become more powerful and influential in their world. Related problems were raised, and, where appropriate, explored, with discussion following. If possible, class consensus about the issue was formed. Students discussed the types of action that could be taken to improve their world and worked to construct a collective vision of a more just society. If they could, they took social action in their community to get its members to support their social agendas and improve their world.

Examining these procedures gives insight into the Social Reconstruction ideology.

Start Where Students Are

All the middle school projects began as a result of problems that students brought to school from experiences in their community, that the teacher identified based on personal familiarity with the community, or that newspapers reported about events that touched students' lives. Saving Morningstar Park, Environmental Hazards, School Overcrowding, Random Traffic Stops, and Liquor Store Distribution (students frequently encountered drunks in front of liquor stores on their way to and from school) resulted from student experiences in their neighborhood. World Wealth Distribution was explored when discussions of poverty and hunger arose after UNICEF collections at Halloween and Thanksgiving. Cost of the Iraq War arose from newspaper articles the teacher brought to class in response to student concerns.

Personal Experience

An experience that intellectually and emotionally involved the children in an issue and its related mathematics was part of each project. The experience set the stage for the mathematical activities and discussions that followed. Children took field trips in coordination with the Morningstar Park, Environmental Hazards, and School Overcrowding projects. They shared personal experiences during the Liquor Store Distribution project, participated in a simulation during the World Wealth Distribution project, and did both during the Random Traffic Stops project.

Examining one of these experiences gives insight into classroom instructional dynamics. The simulation used during World Wealth Distribution provides an example. "The purpose of this activity is to . . . demonstrate . . . differences in wealth between different areas of the world" (Hersh & Peterson, 2005, p. 64).

To begin the World Wealth Distribution simulation, students are paired. Each pair is given a world map and asked to identify the continents. Students are also asked to estimate the number of people in the world. After they make their estimate, they are shown a current estimate in an almanac. Students are then given 24 chips (one for each of the 24 students in the class) and asked, "How many people is each chip worth?" (Hersh & Peterson, 2005, p. 64). (Students do the calculations: since there are about 6 billion people in the world, each chip represents about 250 million people.) Each pair of students is now given 24 red chips and asked to stack them on continents based on where they believe people reside. Next, student estimates are discussed, and then the accurate figures are disclosed. Students do calculations, rearrange their chips to reflect the data, and discuss what the stacks of chips tell them about the distribution of the world's population. Students are now given 24 blue chips, which "represent all the wealth produced in the world," and asked "to put the chips on the continents to indicate their estimate of who gets this wealth" (p. 65). Student estimates are discussed, as are the comparative sizes of the two stacks of chips on each continent.

The direction of the activity now changes. Each student chooses "an 'I was born in . . . ' slip from a container labeled 'chance of birth'" (Hersh & Peterson, 2005, p. 65). Students are now taken to the playground, where a large map of the world has been drawn with chalk, and are asked to stand on the continent in which their slip of paper says they were born. The students on each continent designate one student as a negotiator. Students are now told that the world's wealth is going to be distributed. They are also told that once the wealth is distributed, each group needs to discuss their situation. Twenty-four chocolate chip cookies (each representing one twenty-fourth of the world's wealth) are now distributed to the continents in proportion to the way in which wealth is distributed in the world. After group discussions, negotiators from each continent visit other continents to try to find out what others received and to negotiate for a more equitable distribution of resources. Negotiators return to their respective continents for discussion, and then another round of negotiation begins—with some students pleading for a more equitable distribution of cookies. Negotiators then return to their continents and discuss the results of their negotiations; trading and donation of resources take place; students begin eating cookies; and, while eating, they begin to discuss (with a great deal of emotion) what they think of the way the world's resources are distributed. Students then fill out a work sheet in which percentages need to be calculated: the work sheet contains seven columns for continents, population, percentage of world population per continent, number of students in class (24) on each continent, wealth (GNP) of each continent, percentage of world GNP per continent, and number of cookies (out of 24) each continent received. Students also construct graphs that depict different aspects of their data using percentages, fractions, and decimals.

Intense Discussion

Group discussion is an important Social Reconstruction instructional method. In exploring an issue such as world wealth distribution, a discussion allows students to expose their thoughts and values to each other, have their thoughts and values challenged, and reconstruct their thoughts and values in light of insights obtained from the discussion and any group consensus that might arise from it. Students' personal experiences with an issue and their mathematical analyses of it provide the substance for the discussion. For example, when students finish the World Wealth Distribution simulation and complete their calculations and graphs, the teacher leads a whole-class discussion during which students discuss the following types of questions: How do you feel about the unequal distribution of world wealth? How does the inequality of wealth affect the kinds of lives people lead? "Should wealth be distributed equally?" "How does the unequal distribution of wealth affect the power that groups of people hold?" and "What can be done about the unequal way wealth is distributed?" (Hersh & Peterson, 2005, p. 66). During the discussion, information is exchanged, injustices are highlighted, values are clarified, feelings are expressed, solutions to problems are suggested, and alternative solutions are assessed. After the discussion, "students write an essay about their feelings, what they learned, what questions they continue to have, and what they might want to do about world poverty" (p. 66). Media other than the written word—such as sociodrama, singing, painting, and dance—are frequently used to express student thoughts and feelings.

Follow-Up

Follow-up activities examine related problems that can be analyzed using the mathematics introduced in the initial activity. These activities provide practice for both social analysis and mathematical development, and they allow students to explore even more deeply their meanings, their values, the ways in which social institutions and events liberate or enslave them, and how they might become more powerful actors in their world. For example, World Wealth Distribution was followed up using newspaper data about the unequal distribution of wealth in America, unemployment trends in the U.S., and the hiring of 10,000 workers by a new company in the students' neighborhood (students compared the racial distribution of company workers and their neighborhood population; Peterson, 2005, p. 13).

Teaching mathematics using simulations, discussion, and follow-up activities that foster continuing discussion at ever deeper levels can be powerful. The teacher comments about World Wealth Distribution as follows:

> Not only does such a lesson connect math to human beings and social reality, it does so in a way that goes beyond paper and pencil exercises; it truly brings math to life. I could simply tell my students about the world's unequal distribution of wealth, but that wouldn't

> have the same emotional impact as seeing classmates in the North American and European sections of the map get so many more cookies even though they have so many fewer people. (Peterson, 2005, p. 13)
>
> I have found that as a result of [using activities such as World Wealth Distribution that] . . . my students' interest and skill in math have increased, both in terms of their understanding of basic concepts and their ability to solve problems. Furthermore, they can better clarify social issues, understand the structures of society, and offer options for better social policies. . . . Kids need every tool they can get to make this world—their world—a better place. Mathematics is one very important tool. (p. 15)

Vision and Social Action

In all of the above projects, students not only experienced, analyzed, and discussed social situations, but they also discussed how they could improve their world and, where feasible, took action to do so. Discussing how to improve one's world involved understanding a problem, examining options for improvement, clarifying values, taking a value stance, making a commitment, forming a group vision (or several visions, if differing opinions existed) of what a more just world might look like, and deciding what social action or actions should be taken to correct the problem. As part of this process, students wrote reports on their opinions about the social justice issues involved in each project and how these injustices might be rectified. Students' discussion of how they might improve their world was paralleled by discussion of how they might improve themselves; their meanings, thoughts, and values; and their ability to act with power, effectiveness, and wisdom in their world.

Social action directed toward making the world a better place included students' attempts to convince their families and community to support their endeavors and take the action necessary to mitigate existing problems. For some projects, students shared their opinions about the issues with family and friends, collected data on their family and friends' opinions before and after sharing their own opinions, and then, back in the classroom, aggregated the data they had collected using graphs and data analysis in such a way that they could see the results of sharing their opinions.

Student social action during the Environmental Hazards project created such a community uproar that it resulted in the elimination of neighborhood toxic waste. When students discovered that their school was overcrowded, they created and distributed flyers, made a poster displaying their findings, shared their findings with the school district, and gave a presentation to their school advisory council. Letters and reports were delivered to newspapers and city offices on issues such as liquor store licenses, racial profiling, and the number of college scholarships that could be given for the cost of one B-2 bomber used in the Iraq War. Students shared with children in earlier grades the results of their mathematical inquiries (including their graphs and data analysis) regarding world wealth distribution and other social concerns—which involved teaching younger children mathematics and showing them how it could help them better understand their world. Action taken to reconstruct society followed and reflected action students took to reconstruct themselves as part of class discussions and experiences.

Academics

All the projects involved mathematics presented in the school curriculum: calculation with integers, decimals, and percents; graphing and algebra; probability and statistics; measurement and data analysis; mathematical reasoning, problem solving, communication, and representation; and the formation of mathematical connections. The teacher reported that students learned the mathematics faster and with greater understanding because it was relevant to their lives and because they saw how it gave them insight into their world and power to influence events.

When asked whether it is appropriate to interject social or political issues into mathematics instruction or whether mathematics teachers and curriculum should remain neutral, the teacher's response was that "teaching math in a neutral manner is not possible. No math teaching—no teaching of any kind, for that matter—is actually 'neutral'" (Gutstein & Peterson, 2005, p. 6). For example, compare these two word problems:

> A 14-year-old girl goes into a store and purchases 12 candy bars. Each candy bar costs 43 cents. How much does she spend?
>
> A 14-year-old factory worker in Central America makes children's clothing for Wal-Mart. She earns 43 cents an hour and works 12 hours each day. How much money does she make in one day?

The teacher continued,

> While both problems are valid examples of applying multi-digit multiplication, each has more to say as well. The first example has a subtext of consumerism and unhealthy eating habits; the second has an explicit text of global awareness and empathy. Both are political, in that each highlights important social relations.
>
> When teachers fail to include math problems that help students confront important global issues, or when they don't bring out the underlying implications of problems like the first example here, these are political choices, whether the teachers recognize them as such or not. These choices teach students three things:
>
> They suggest that politics are not relevant to everyday situations.
>
> They cast mathematics as having no role in understanding social injustice and power imbalances.
>
> They provide students with no experience using math to make sense of, and try to change, unjust situations.
>
> These all contribute to disempowering students and are objectively political acts, though not necessarily conscious ones. (Gutstein & Peterson, p. 6)

It is important to note that the "reconstruction of the curriculum" required for teaching courses such as the mathematics class just described

> would not call for the addition of new subjects. Indeed, to superficial observation, perhaps no important changes would be discernible. The same disciplines would be taught. . . . Children would learn to read and write and figure; they would work and play together. But the . . . orientation would be different. . . . [T]he emphasis everywhere would be placed on the social and co-operative. . . . [S]ubject matter composing the curriculum would be given a social meaning. (Counts, 1934, pp. 544–546)

In addition to being given social meaning and being placed in a value-laden social context, academic content is treated in an interdisciplinary manner, with content from different disciplines being integrated together rather than being held apart.

Society and Reconstruction

Social Perspective

Social Reconstructionists view their world from a social perspective. The nature of society as it has been, as it is, and as it should be determines most of their concepts and assumptions. For example, *human experience*, *education*, *truth*, and *knowledge* are socially defined. Human experience is believed to be fundamentally shaped by cultural factors; meaning in people's lives is defined in terms of their relationship to society. Education is viewed as a function of the society that supports it and is defined in the context of a particular culture. Truth and knowledge are defined by cultural assumptions; they are idiosyncratic to each society and testable according to criteria based in social consensus rather than empiricism or logic.

As a result, Social Reconstructionists believe that "there is no good individual apart from some conception of the nature of the good society. Man without human society and human culture is not man" (Counts, 1932a, p. 258). They believe that "there is also no good education apart from some conception of the nature of the good society. Education is not some pure and mystical essence that remains unchanged from everlasting to everlasting" (p. 258). They believe that there is no truth or knowledge apart from some conception of the nature of the good society; "and the good society is not something that is given by nature: it must be fashioned by the hand and brain of man" (Counts, 1932b, p. 15). Important here is the belief in cultural relativity. The "good individual," the "good education," and "truth and knowledge" are defined by a particular culture, and the only thing that gives them either meaning or value is the existence of that culture in a particular time and place. Counts affirms this:

> The historical record shows that education is always a function of time, place, and circumstance. In its basic philosophy, its social objective, and its program of instruction, it inevitably reflects . . . the experiences, the condition, and the hopes, fears, and aspirations of a particular people . . . at a particular point in history. . . . [I]t is never organized and conducted with sole reference to absolute and universal terms. . . . [E]ducation as a whole is always relative. . . . There can be no all-embracing educational philosophy, policy, or program suited to all cultures and all ages. (1934, p. 1)

Since society is considered to be currently undergoing a crisis, it follows that its conception of the good man, the good education, and truth and knowledge are also undergoing a crisis. For stability to return, a vision of a good society must be developed. Conceptions of the good man, the good education, and truth and knowledge will be derived from that vision. As individuals reconstruct themselves based on their vision, they act on society so as to bring into existence new conceptions of the good man, the good education, and truth and knowledge; and from the reconstruction of society in accordance with the vision comes the actualization of these conceptions.

Deep Social Structures

Underlying the dynamics of society and schools are deep social structures that shape and determine human behavior.

When examining, analyzing, and comprehending society, Social Reconstructionists often connect social phenomena to concepts such as colonial Eurocentric conceptions of knowledge, culture, social class, and values. For example, when dealing with social problems, these educators are frequently concerned about how such things as "inequalities, power, and human suffering are rooted in basic institutional structures" (Giroux, 2005, p. 21).

When looking at schools, Social Reconstructionists frequently focus on hidden aspects of the curriculum that invisibly shape human relationships and behavior. Here their perspective might lead them to, for example, examine "schools . . . as part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the class-driven dominant society" (McLaren, 2007, p. 18); view "schooling as a resolutely political and cultural enterprise" (p. 187); analyze "schools . . . as sorting mechanisms in which select groups of students are favored on the basis of race, class, and gender" (p. 187); or discuss schools as institutions that "perpetuate or reproduce the social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain the existing dominant economic and class relations of the larger society" (pp. 214–215). As McLaren emphasizes,

> the traditional view of classroom instruction and learning as a neutral process antiseptically removed from the concepts of power, politics, history, and context can no longer be credibly endorsed. . . . [R]esearchers have given primacy to the social, the cultural, the political, and the economic, in order to better understand the workings of contemporary schooling. (2007, p. 187)

The Individual in Society

Social Reconstructionists' concern is primarily the forces at work in society that shape human experience and secondarily the individuals at work who shape society (although both function together). They focus on economic, political, social, and educational forces that control the impact on individuals in society of such varied things as social class, cultural and linguistic heritage, moral trends, and aesthetic movements. Causal explanations proceed from the dynamics of society as a whole to the dynamics of social subgroups to the individual. In this context, individuals are viewed as fulfilling their potential in relationship to social groups, in interaction with other individuals, and as part of human communities. This does not mean that man is a creature of social determinism. Man is shaped by society and man can shape society. In fact, individuals must first reconstruct themselves before they can reconstruct society. However, interpretations and intentions are expressed with respect to social groups rather than individuals.

Society, Change, and Crisis

The Social Reconstruction view of society is one of historical evolution: societies pass through periods of evolution, stability, and degeneration. One of the prime characteristics of our society is that it is undergoing change that threatens its survival. Whether because of technological, economic, political, cultural, racial, or psychological factors, many of our society's problem solving strategies and institutions are dysfunctional. If society fails to detect that its problem solving strategies and institutions are dysfunctional, these strategies and institutions will become threats to its survival.

The situation of society, however, is full of promise as well as menace. The changes wrought on society by its internal dynamics have extended the limits previously set by its structure so that, as Counts said, "there lies within our grasp the most humane, the most beautiful, and the most majestic civilization ever fashioned by any people." The possibility to significantly improve the total human condition lies within reach.

Hope exists, for it is believed that there is no deterministic, metaphysical design that prescribes the history of a society, even though societies are largely formed and limited by the characteristics of the period in which they exist. Society hammers out its own history through the thoughts and struggles of its members: "The course it takes and the goals it attains depend wholly upon the choice made and the failures and successes experienced by man" (Brameld, 1956, pp. 60–61). As a result, the evolution of society is "bound merely by our ideals, our power of self discipline, and by our ability to devise social arrangements suited to" our situation (Counts, 1932a, p. 260).

Reconstruction and Vision

Faced with the crises of society, Social Reconstructionists devise a vision of a new, better society that lacks its existing problems. They then develop educational programs that allow people to see the differences between the crisis-ridden present society and the future "good" society in such a way that it motivates them to transform the current society into the future one.

Social Reconstructionists do not accept current societal conditions as unalterable "givens." Nor do they accept present social conditions as factors to be improved through simple tinkering. They reject certain aspects of the present crisis-ridden society, and they attempt to build a new society out of the existing one rather than attempt to perfect the best aspects of the existing society in hopes that this will make the present society more just and equitable. They seek to provide "for qualitatively better life for all through the construction of a society based on nonexploitative relations and social justice" (McLaren, 2007, p. 195).

In assuming that the way to overcome the present social crisis is to envision and implement a future better society, Social Reconstructionists assume that people need a "compelling and challenging vision of human destiny" (Counts, 1932a, p. 259) that points the way to better social conditions:

> The times are literally crying for a new vision of American destiny. . . . Such a vision of what America might become . . . I would introduce into our schools as the supreme imposition . . . one to which our children are entitled—a priceless legacy which . . . should be the first concern of our [educational] profession to fashion and bequeath. . . . To refuse to face the task of creating a vision of a future America immeasurably more just and noble and beautiful than the America of today is to evade the most crucial, difficult, and important educational task. (Counts, 1932b, pp. 54–55)

The Social Reconstruction vision of the future good society has several characteristics. First, it is not a finished vision that portrays in precise detail a utopia in its ultimate state, but rather a vision of direction that points to the way society must move toward reconstruction. It is "a vision of the possibilities which lie ahead" (Counts, 1932b, p. 37) rather than the endpoint that society should reach in order to achieve perfection (Freire, 1992, p. 175).

Second, the vision does not prescribe a specific program of action that dictates how it is to be achieved. The situations in which people find themselves determine this. The vision is a general one that provides values and directions, not a blueprint that specifies exactly how to build the future good society. This is as it should be, given the Social Reconstruction belief in social relativity and the uniqueness of the particular "time, place, and circumstances" in which people find themselves (Counts, 1934, p. 1).

Third, the vision of the future good society is created in response to existing social conditions. As such, it embodies both a picture of reality as it is and a vision of reality as it ought to be. Its power lies in its ability both to offer people salvation from an intolerable reality, reality as it is, and to offer them a vision of life as it should be. Understanding the vision requires that one understand society as it is in order to fully appreciate society as it ought to be.

Fourth, the Social Reconstruction vision is a social rather than individual vision. It is a "public vision of self- and social empowerment," a "vision . . . that extend[s] the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and freedom to the widest possible set of institutional and lived relations" (Giroux, 2005, p. 74). It is a vision that allows the masses, which comprise society, to overcome their problems together and to collectively achieve the good life. It is not a vision that allows certain individuals to achieve the good life and escape from their problems at the expense of others.

The Social Reconstruction vision of the future good society helps people reconstruct society in several ways.

- The vision allows people from diverse situations to rise above their particular circumstances to see social crises as a whole (as, for example, when African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans see that they are all oppressed), allows them to share a common vision of a better life, and allows them to act together to meet common needs and to collectively better themselves and improve society as a whole (Apple, 1996, pp. 14–15).
- The vision offers people an alternative to and the possibility of escape from their crisis-ridden society through "a language of possibility . . . [that] goes beyond critique," "a positive language of human empowerment" (Giroux, 1992, p. 10). Without the perception that their oppression can be overcome and without a language that allows them to speak about overcoming their oppression, people would not be able to wage the struggle to reconstruct their society.
- The vision has inherent values that enable people to see their problems as solvable rather than to simply accept them as innate characteristics of their world. For example, someone who places no value on freedom would not see the lack of it as a problem. Educating people to value freedom prepares the way for dissatisfaction that can lead to action. The vision educates people to see problems and to see them as solvable.
- The vision offers people the hope of something better, hope that can motivate them to act in ways not normal for them. As Freire says, "without a vision for tomorrow, hope

is impossible" (1997, p. 45), and any "attempt to do without hope, in the struggle to improve the world, as if that struggle could be reduced to calculated acts alone, or a purely scientific approach, is a frivolous illusion" (1992, p. 2). Giving people hope and courage that allow them to step outside their normal social roles is crucial in motivating them to overcome their social problems, problems that so frequently trap them in hopelessness and ignorance (Greene, 1988, p.25).

- The vision gives people clear long-range goals that offer direction to their thinking so that they do not become distracted from their reconstruction endeavors by the immediacies of daily life. Short-range and vaguely defined goals will not suffice, for "it is now imperative that we know where we want to go . . . because, so long as we do not know we shall be unprepared to go there" (Brameld, 1956, p. 76).
- The vision of the future good society defines the nature of the good individual, the good education, and worthwhile truth and knowledge. Without the ability to identify these, people would not be able to cultivate them and make them multiply in ways that help reconstruct society.

The emphasis on developing a vision of a good society leads Social Reconstructionists to utopianism. Here the distinction must be made between utopias of escape and utopias of social reconstruction. The first leaves society the way it is as small groups or individuals escape from it; the second seeks to change society so that people can live in it and interact with it on their own terms (Mumford, 1933, p. 15). Social Reconstruction visions are utopias of social reconstruction.

Social Dynamics

In viewing society in its stark reality, Social Reconstructionists usually identify three social subgroups: the "bad guys," the "good guys," and the "masses." Freire calls the good guys and the bad guys the "oppressed" and the "oppressors" (Freire, 1970). McLaren calls them the "subordinate" and the "dominant" social classes (McLaren, 2007, pp. 211–212). Both the bad guys and the good guys are smaller groups who attempt to control the masses. The bad guys perpetuate the status quo by supporting ideas and institutions suited to a bygone age in order to selfishly exploit the masses. The good guys are future-oriented forces attempting to bring into existence a better and more just society run for the benefit of the masses. In 1956, Brameld made explicit this view of social dynamics:

> If the reconstructionist is prepared to argue that he is the minority spokesman for values that are already cherished by the majority, whether consciously or not, he is equally prepared to show that another minority actually dominates the majority. This is the minority that now so largely controls the instruments of power and that has succeeded in persuading the majority that their own interests are best served by perpetuating those controls . . . in behalf of continued scarcity, chronic insecurity, frustration, and war. In this sense, indeed, one may say that the great political struggle that goes on in our democracy is not, after all, one between the majority and a minority . . . it is between at least two organized minorities. One minority is concerned with widening. . . . The opposing minority works to narrow . . . (1956, pp. 129–130)

Note several assumptions in this statement. First, the good guys are out of power and the bad guys are in control of the masses. Responsibility for the ills of society falls solely upon the shoulders of the bad guys.

Second, the good guys are "the minority spokesmen for *values* that are *already cherished* by the *majority, whether consciously or not*" (italics added). This assumption leads to belief in a hierarchical set of values—where some values are better than others—and to several other beliefs: that the good guys possess the truth as represented in their better values; that those values are good for the masses whether they are conscious of it or not; that it is permissible to educate the masses as one chooses, since one knows what is really good for them; and that it is permissible to control and manipulate the masses so long as it is for their own good.

Third, society is engaged in a "great political struggle," with the good and bad guys waging war over the masses. As McLaren and Giroux exclaim, "educators need to wage nothing less than war in the interest of the sacredness of human life, collective dignity for the wretched of the earth, and the right to live in peace and harmony" (1997, p. 13). This is a holy war, a great crusade in which good battles evil over value-laden issues. Further, education and the school are weapons to be used in the war.

Fourth, the war's emphasis is on forming a single, unified "group mind" that agrees upon what the true values of society are and what the vision of the future good society should be (Brameld, 1956, p. 247).

Underlying this view of social dynamics are several other suppositions. Only the "oppressed" are the ones who can find within themselves the strength and vision to rectify the problems of society. They do so because of the pain of the social injustices they feel and their innate impulse to be recognized as fully human and to be treated as such. The powerful and privileged of society cannot find the strength to transform society into a more just and egalitarian institution because they cannot see human equality to be in their vested interest. In improving their social conditions, the oppressed correct some of the problems of society, and in so doing make society a better place for everyone to live in (Freire, 1970). (For example, in the U.S. a century ago, only a few women struggled for equal rights because they felt the pain of inequality, but now that conditions have improved for women, we all benefit.)

Reconstruction Through Education

Education takes place in many locations, including the family, community, and school. Social Reconstructionists want to influence how education takes place in all of these locations and believe that it is the job of educators to do so. However, it is in the school where educators focus their endeavors—whether the school is located in a school building, home, factory, or park.

The School as the Institution of Change

Social Reconstructionists dedicate themselves to the reconstruction of society. Their approach consists of analyzing and understanding society, constructing a vision of an improved society, and acting to transform the existing society into a better one. This approach is embedded in school curricula that are taught to students. Schools then become the social institution through which leadership is provided and action is initiated to reconstruct society.

Education, thus, has the role of preparing people to transform society. To accomplish this, educators

> should deliberately reach for power and then make the most of their conquest. . . . To the extent that they are permitted to fashion the curriculum and the procedures of the school they will definitely and positively influence the social attitudes, ideals, and behaviors of the coming generation (Counts, 1932b, pp. 28–29)

and through them enable the masses of society to reconstruct themselves. By doing so, they will reconstruct society.

This requires educators to assume new roles and functions, for at present they are meek followers of social consensus rather than dynamic leaders who mold social beliefs and values. This means that "instead of shunning power, the profession [of education] should rather seek power and then strive to use that power fully and wisely and in the interests of the great masses of the people" (Counts, 1932b, pp. 29–30), for "if the schools are to be really effective, they must become centers for the building, and not merely for the contemplation of our civilization" (p. 37). Schools must

> face squarely and courageously every social issue, come to grips with life in all of its stark reality, establish an organic relation with the community, develop a realistic and comprehensive theory of welfare, fashion a compelling and challenging vision of human destiny, and become somewhat less frightened than . . . [they are] today of the bogeys of imposition and indoctrination. (Counts, 1932a, p. 259)

For this to be accomplished, current conceptions of education (which view schools as transmitters of established disciplinary knowledge and social values) must be reconceptualized so that they are in phase with a vision of the future based in concepts of social justice and human empowerment and so that they prepare students to live in and to transform our current society into the envisioned future society. Schools will then be catalysts that stimulate the reconstruction of society.

Education as a Social Process

Social Reconstructionists want to reconstruct society through social processes. Their first concern is the education of the group and their second the education of the individual. From this perspective, learning experiences are construed to be group experiences that take place through human interaction, and the focus is on the "group mind" rather than the "individual mind." As Freire writes, "in this theory of action one cannot speak of *an actor*, nor simply of *actors*, but rather of *actors in intercommunication*" (1970, p. 123). Individuals are critical to the ideology, for it is through the reconstruction of individuals that one reconstructs society. However, the education of individuals is viewed as achievable primarily through group-centered, social processes.

Here one speaks of social self-realization for both the society and individuals, not of individual self-realization. Here social consensus plays a central role, for it is believed that once social consensus is reached about the nature of current society and the vision for the future society, it will be possible for the masses to reconstruct society. The aim is to fashion, through education, a social consensus among the masses that will by majority rule force society to align itself with the vision of the future good society and eradicate current social ills. It is through the creation of social consensus that educators hope to achieve social reconstruction both by and for society.

Educational Methods: Group Discussion and Experience

Two of the primary instructional methods used by Social Reconstructionists are the discussion and experience methods. Both depend on having students learn indirectly through social media.

The discussion method involves engaging students in conversations with their peers, during which teachers elicit from them their thoughts and feelings. The discussion process allows teachers to get students to expose their meanings to the group so that the group—under the guidance of the teacher—can help them reconstruct their meanings. During discussions, the teacher provides the rules for discussion, the desired social perspective and values, and the model for the modes of thinking in which students are to engage. The instructive function is embedded in the language, questions, evidence, value judgments, modes of argumentation, and criteria of relevance the teacher uses during discussion and urges students to use by example. Here, it is primarily through the medium of the discussion process rather than through the message (or topic) of discussion that instruction takes place.

Many forms of the discussion method exist. Values clarification was popular during the 1970s. By the end of the 20th century, critical analysis, which includes both a "language of critique" and a "language of possibility" and is part of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2006, pp. 4–5), had become popular.

The experience method involves placing students in an environment where they encounter a social crisis. Students learn about the social crisis both from those who usually function in that environment and from their teacher. The people who normally function in the environment share with students their attitudes, values, modes of perception and interpretation, and worldview regarding the social crisis being examined. The teacher acts as a counselor and discussion leader who provides instructional opportunities during which students can share, discuss, reflect on, and construct meaning about their experiences. This instructional method uses something like a combination of group therapy and an apprenticeship system to introduce students to an educator's view of a social crisis and vision of a future utopia. During the experience method, the teacher is not an imparter of information but a colleague who can be trusted and confided in as a friend. This puts the teacher and students on the same side of the experience and facilitates the sharing of experiences, knowledge, meanings, feelings, values, and visions.

Students can be provided with many types of experiences with social crises. They can participate in public protests or demonstrations, paint a school in a depressed urban or rural community, clean up trash-ridden parks or streams, visit elderly adults in nursing homes, work in shelters for battered women or the homeless, or help the poor in food pantries or soup kitchens.

Education and Language

Underlying both the discussion and experience methods is a belief in the crucial role that language plays in education and social reconstruction. As McLaren and Giroux emphasize, "knowledge . . . is a social construction" that takes place largely through language, "which means that the world we inhabit as individuals is constructed symbolically by the mind (and body) through social interaction" (1997, p. 27). Further, "the nature of the language we use determines how we make sense of our experiences and the type of social action we choose to engage in as a result of interpreting our experiences" (p. 21). In addition, "language . . . is always situated within ideology and power/knowledge relations," which means that "meanings of any event or experience are only available through the language selected by the particular interpretive community wishing to render such event intelligible" (p. 22). As a result, "the struggle over how to name and transform experience [through language] is one of the most critical issues in . . . the fight for social change" (p. 26), for

> the purpose of developing a critical language . . . is not to describe the world more objectively, but to create a more ethically empowering world which encourages a greater awareness of the way in which power can be mobilized for the purposes of human liberation. (p. 21)

Education and Social Change

The question of how Social Reconstructionists—whose views are held by a minority within society—are to convince society what is best for it and thus bring into existence the desired social consensus raises questions about the civic responsibility of educators to the society they serve, educators' engagement in politics, and the socialization, acculturation, or indoctrination of a social majority by a minority. These questions arise because Social Reconstructionists believe that their insight into the nature of society and what is good for the masses is superior to and different from that of the masses, and because they believe that it is their job to transform society's knowledge base and values so that they agree with theirs.

Civic Responsibility

Do educators have the right to attempt to change the social patterns of a culture without the permission of its members? Do educators have the right to teach children to live in a world that might be different from that of their parents, and of which their parents might not approve? What responsibility do educators have to the society they serve?

In other words, "are schools to uncritically serve and reproduce the existing society or challenge the social order to develop and advance its democratic imperatives?" (Giroux, 1992, p. 18). Giroux's answer to this question is simple: "I opt for the latter. . . . I believe that schools should function to provide students with the knowledge, character, and moral vision that build civic courage" (p. 18) in a manner that leads to the reconstruction of society in accordance with "the principles and practices of human dignity, liberty, and social justice" (p. 8).

From the Social Reconstruction perspective, educators have the responsibility to go beyond simply reflecting the wishes of society and to do what is best for society. In fact, "representing as they do, not the interests of the moment or of any special class, but rather the common and abiding interests of the people, [educators and] teachers are under heavy social obligation to protect and further those interests" (Counts, 1932b, p. 29). If this involves educating a culture's children in such a way that they will reject parts of the existing culture, then it is necessary to do so for the good of the culture. The role of educators in this time of crisis is different from the roles they have had in the past. No longer are educators simply charged with the responsibility of inculcating in children the myths of their society or developing in children their ability to dispassionately analyze social history. They must take a stance with respect to the current social crisis and educate students in such a way that they, too, work to reconstruct society. This means that education must be

> a form of social action. . . . [T]he educator fails . . . if he refuses to step out of academic cloisters, . . . reject the role of a disinterested spectator, take an active part in shaping events, make selections among social values, and adopt, however tentatively and broadly, some conception of social welfare. (Counts, 1934, pp. 2–3)

Education and Politics

As actors within a "form of social action," Social Reconstructionists engage in political action with a clearly defined set of values and an ethical stance. A Social Reconstruction educator "makes no claim to political neutrality" (McLaren, 2007, p. 31) and unabashedly accepts that "no curriculum, policy, or program is ideologically or politically innocent, and that the concept of the curriculum is inextricably related to issues of social class, culture, gender, and power" (p. 213). This is because it is assumed that

> schooling always represents an introduction to, preparation for, and legitimization of particular forms of social life. It is always implicated in relations of power, social practices, and the favoring of forms of knowledge that support a specific vision of past, present, and future. (p. 188)

This is a surprise to many educators. As Freire exclaims, "this is a great discovery, education is politics!" (1987, p. 46). Social Reconstruction education is political for numerous reasons, including the following, which Giroux describes:

> At best it teaches students to think critically about the knowledge they gain, and what it means to recognize antidemocratic forms of power and to fight substantive injustices in a world marked by deep inequalities. (2006, p. 8)

> [It] create[s] new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplinary boundaries. . . . This is . . . an . . . issue . . . of power, ethics, and politics. . . . At stake here is . . . [the provision of] knowledge, skills, and habits for students . . . [that allow them] to read history in ways that enable them to reclaim their identities in the interests of constructing more democratic and just forms of life. (2005, p. 69)

> [It emphasizes] the intellectual, emotional, and ethical investments we make as part of our attempt to negotiate, accommodate, and transform the world in which we find ourselves. The purpose and vision that drives such a pedagogy must be based on a politics and view of authority, that links teaching and learning to forms of self- and social empowerment . . . that extend the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and freedom to the widest possible set of institution[s and people]. (2005, p. 74).

While embracing their political agendas, Social Reconstructionists emphasize that all educators promote one political agenda or another. If educators' instructional efforts are not directed toward social reconstruction, then they are directed toward social maintenance—which is simply the opposite side of the political agenda.

Education and Socialization

To accomplish what they believe is best for society, Social Reconstructionists use whatever means that they require, that society will tolerate, and that their visions will support. But the means one uses to accomplish preconceived ends—as inherent in the educator's vision of the future good society—raises the question of social acculturation and imposition.

Many educators are fearful of the phrase "social acculturation" (or "imposition") because they believe that it implies changing people's values and social perspectives in a manner that they are not fully conscious of and without their prior agreement through the use of subconscious educational processes. This is not its meaning for Social Reconstructionists. For them, socially acculturating students means deliberately socializing them, accepting the biased values that underlie all socialization and educational processes. Those who are afraid of the phrase "social acculturation" or "social imposition" often wish to replace it with either "socialize" or "educate."

Do educators have the right to convince students of their values, views of current day social crises, and visions of the future good society, either with or without their consent? The answer for early Social Reconstruction educators during the 1930s was "Yes!" Education must "become less frightened than it is today of the bogies of imposition and indoctrination" and deliberately use them openly and forthrightly during instruction (Counts, 1932b, pp. 9–10).

There are many reasons why Social Reconstructionists condone the use of social acculturation (or imposition). Central to them all is the belief that social acculturation is unavoidable and that education cannot avoid being biased. Social Reconstructionists believe that social acculturation is an inevitable consequence of living in social groups. As Counts (1932b, p. 13) phrases it,

> the most crucial of all circumstances conditioning human life is birth into a particular culture. By birth one becomes a Chinese, an Englishman, a Hottentot, a Sioux Indian, a Turk, or a[n] . . . American. . . . By being nurtured on a body of culture, however . . . the individual is at once imposed upon

and acculturated. To grow from infancy to adulthood in a culture is to become socialized into and by that culture. In fact, "the induction of the immature individual into the life of the group" through the process of socialization is the traditional role of the school (Counts, 1934, p. 536). In inducting "the immature individual into the life of the group," education "stands at the focal point in the process of cultural evolution—at the point of contact between the older and the younger generation where values are selected and rejected" (p. 532). As such, the school necessarily acts as an agent of society in acculturating the child into society:

> 1 am prepared to defend the thesis that all education contains a large element of imposition, that in the very nature of the case this is inevitable, that the existence and evolution of society depend upon it, that it is consequently eminently desirable, and that the frank acceptance of this fact by the educator is a major professional obligation. I even contend that the failure to do this involves the clothing of one's own deepest prejudices in the garb of universal truth. (Counts, 1932b, p. 12)

From the Social Reconstruction perspective, bias and partiality are inherent in the very nature of education. The questions teachers ask, the language teachers use, the social interactions acceptable in school (respect for teachers, for example), and the hidden curricula of schools (for example, expectations for work-related behavior of children from different economic classes; Anyon, 1980) all have social biases embedded in them. Questions of what to teach, what to expect of students, where to teach, and how to teach all involve value decisions that make impartiality impossible. Social Reconstructionists believe educators who consider themselves impartial and neutral transmitters of instruction to be ignorant of the nature of their endeavors.

What is really at issue is not whether social acculturation or imposition will take place in schools or whether schools will be biased. The question is whether a social minority should use education for purposes other than those of simply getting the individual to fit into and adjust to society as it is. The Social Reconstructionists' answer is clear: "Neutrality with respect to the great issues that agitate society, while perhaps theoretically possible, is practically tantamount to giving support to the forces of conservatism" (Counts, 1932b, p. 54). And to give support to the forces of conservatism is to perpetuate the existing social crisis that threatens society's very existence. The following statement by George Counts gives the flavor of one way in which social bias could be introduced into the school:

> The several divisions of subject matter composing the curriculum would all be given a social meaning. . . . [For example, g]eography would be taught and studied, not merely as a body of information useful and interesting to the individual, but as the physical basis for the building of a finer civilization and culture. The natural resources of the nation would actually be regarded as possessions of the nation—as the source of a richer and more abundant common life, rather than as fields for the operation of profit-seeking enterprise and the accumulation of great private fortunes. . . . All of the subjects of study would be integrated by the might and challenging conception of the building of a great . . . civilization conceived in terms of the widest interests of the masses. (1934, p. 546)

Note that school subjects are still taught, but for purposes of understanding and reconstructing society rather than for purposes inherent in the school subjects themselves.

What needs to be explicitly stated is that Social Reconstructionists do not want to simply program learners' minds or fill them with a specific collection of facts and concepts. Because such an approach would prepare learners to deal with only the crises of the past and not the crises of the future, it is inconsistent with the Social Reconstruction belief in social relativity. It is the unknown crises of the future that children must be prepared to encounter, understand, and act to resolve. Social Reconstructionists want to have children construct a specific social orientation and social perspective along with a specific set of social values and problem solving skills that will allow them to confront, analyze, understand, react to, and rectify whatever social problems might arise in the future—in a manner consistent with the social perspective and values of the educator. Providing learners with such a social perspective and set of social values—which are by definition biased—is what Social Reconstructionists call social acculturation (or imposition).

Historical Context

One could say that the origins of the Social Reconstruction ideology in the U.S. are as old as the founding of the nation. Cremin claims that the American Revolution was "essentially a matter of popular education" and that "teachers used the lectern to nurture ideas of independency, while students organized symbolic actions ranging from burning in effigy to boycotts of tea," as much of the population of the countryside opposed British political, economic, and social practices (1977, p. 38).

Lester Frank Ward began the discussion of the Social Reconstruction agenda in the 1880s and 1890s with the publication of *Dynamic Sociology* (1883) and *The Psychic Factors of Civilization* (1893). He asserted that men had the ability to influence the social world in which they lived through their application of intelligence to the problems of their society and suggested that education through the development of intelligence could influence society to be a more just and equitable place for people.

John Dewey prepared the way for the Social Reconstruction ideology in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1948), where he described education as a crucial ingredient in social and moral development, and in *Democracy and Education*, where he described education as "that reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience" (1916, p. 76).

The ideology was formally brought to life for educators in 1932 when George Counts gave a rousing presentation at the Progressive Education Association annual meeting in which he asked, "Dare the school build a new social order?" This speech led to a deep split in the Progressive Education Association between those who advocated the Social Reconstruction ideology and proponents of the Learner Centered ideology. It also led to the publication, beginning in 1934, of *The Social Frontier: A Journal of Criticism and Reconstruction.*

The Social Reconstruction ideology flourished during the Great Depression of the 1930s, during which many educators questioned the American way of life. Myles

Horton started Highlander in 1932 to help labor deal with the oppression of industry. A bit later, Harold Rugg published a popular social studies textbook series in which he introduced students to controversial economic, social, and political issues (1936–1938).

World War II dimmed the flame of the ideology, but during the 1950s Theodore Brameld wrote books such as *Toward a Reconstructed Philosophy of Education* (1956) advocating the Social Reconstruction ideology. During the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the protest against the Vietnam War were stimulated and supported by adherents of the Social Reconstruction ideology. Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner wrote *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969) and other such books to promote the ideology.

In the last quarter of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century, critical theory began to flourish in academia in a variety of highly competitive forms, including postmodernism, poststructuralism, radical feminism, and critical constructivism (McLaren, 2007, p. 13). These forms of critical theory revolted against traditional ways of viewing and conceptualizing our world; against powerful (oppressive, exploitative, and/or dominant) social groups who made economic, cultural, and educational decisions affecting the lives of those less powerful; and against rationalist, Eurocentric cultural traditions that privileged those who were white, educated, rich, and male in comparison to those who were nonwhite, uneducated, poor, or female. They focused on the subjective and social construction of knowledge rather than on objective knowledge. Critical theory is concerned with emancipation through the questioning of political, economic, social, and psychological conventions that have been previously taken for granted. It is critical of these conventions, using a value system based on social justice and equity, and it promotes action to improve society and the individual through education. Advocates of critical theory sought to do research like that of Jean Anyon, who demonstrated how the hidden curriculum of education influenced the work expectations, aspirations, and perspectives of children of different economic classes (1980). Advocates of critical pedagogy also sought to engage in practical educational endeavors like those of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) described how poor people with little political, economic, or social power could take control of their lives and education by critically examining the social, political, economic, and psychological forces that enslaved them. And advocates of critical pedagogy sought to write social analyses like those by Michael Apple, who in *Ideology and Curriculum* (2004) and *Education and Power* (1995) described how schools are reproductive agents of society that maintain social power relationships by socializing students to society's conception of appropriate class, gender, race, political, cultural, and economic relationships among people through the hidden curriculum of the school.

During the last decade of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century, aspects of the Social Reconstruction ideology have become fashionable among university faculty in departments of education. Some of the slogans they frequently use include "social [cultural, economic, and political] justice," "empowerment," "critical analysis," and "praxis."

We now turn from an examination of beliefs affecting the general context in which Social Reconstructionists work to an examination of their aims and their views of children, learning, teaching, knowledge, and evaluation.

Aims

The aim of Social Reconstructionists is to eliminate from their culture those aspects they believe undesirable, to substitute in their place social practices and values they believe more desirable, and in so doing to reconstruct their culture so that its members attain maximum satisfaction of their material, social, cultural, and spiritual needs. They wish to redirect the growth of their society to reconstruct it into a more just, satisfying, democratic, egalitarian, and humane society than the current one.

To accomplish this, Social Reconstructionists attempt to create a social consensus that rejects the faults of the existing society and affirms the virtues of a future good society. To develop the social consensus, educators manipulate society at the point where it inducts children into the life of the culture: society's educational system. Their intent is to educate youth to reconstruct our current society and to live in a society superior to the existing one. To do this, they build a social, political, economic, and cultural educational program—a curriculum.

Different visions of the future good society and different strategies that suggest how to transform today's society into the future good society exist. The overall Social Reconstruction orientation, however, begins with analysis of society, moves to the creation of a vision of a subjective future good society, and then moves back to manipulation of the existing social reality to transform it into the future good society that will provide its members with the maximum possible social, cultural, economic, and political equality, satisfaction, and justice. In the process, as new social problems and crises arise, members of society become empowered to continually reconstruct themselves and society.

The Child

Children as Social Agents

Children are not viewed primarily as children. Rather, children are viewed as products of society, as social actors, and as potential contributing members of society who can aid in its reconstruction (McLaren, 2007, p. 94). As Giroux indicates, "social betterment must be the necessary consequence of individual flourishing" (1992, p. 11).

Children carry within themselves unique collections of individual meanings that result from experiences they encounter. They bring to school not only their potential to act in the future but also their past histories from family, peer group, and community interactions as well as their personal meanings and ways of thinking that result from such interactions.

At birth, a child is by nature "neither good nor bad; he is merely a bundle of potentialities which may be developed in manifold directions" (Counts, 1932b, p. 15). Throughout their lives, children are "unfinished, uncompleted beings" (Freire, 1970, p. 72) in the process of "becoming [ever] more fully human" (p. 52). It is the role of education to guide the development of the child's potentialities so that they contribute to the functioning of the good society, which will in turn give value to the developed potentialities.

Children are "born helpless" (Counts, 1932b, p. 13). As they grow they develop the power and freedom to mold their world. It is the role of education to guide the development of children's growth so that they use their freedom and power to mold today's society into the best possible future one.

At birth, children are viewed as meaning-making organisms who contain little meaning. As they grow, children construct meaning by actively interpreting the world to themselves. It is the role of education to shape the meaning created by children and the ways in which children make meaning so that they can act to support appropriate visions of a future good society.

Children are not viewed primarily from a developmental context that emphasizes their living fully in each stage through which they pass. As they grow, children progress toward an educated state from which they can contribute to society's reconstruction. It is the role of education to speed children toward this educated state.

Children as Meaning Makers

Children are viewed as meaning makers. They make meaning for themselves as the result of being stimulated by the environment in which they live:

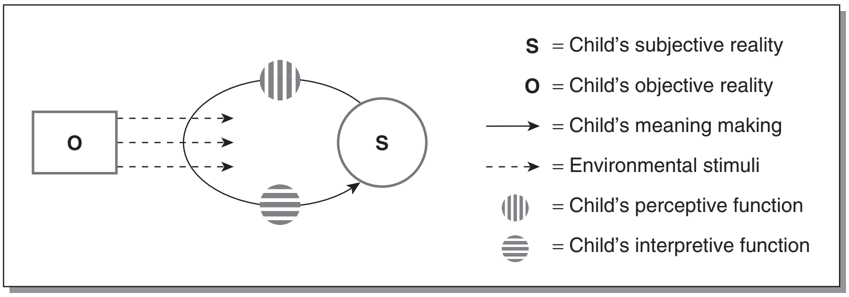
> We now know that each man creates his own unique world, that he, and he alone, generates whatever reality he can ever know. . . . [W]e do not "get" meaning from things, we assign meaning. . . . In other words, whatever is out there [in our environment] isn't anything until we make it something, and then it "is" whatever we make it. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, pp. 98–99)

There are several corollaries to the assumption that people are meaning makers:

- Subjective reality within learners is distinguished from objective reality outside of learners.
- Meaning is assumed to reside in individuals' subjective realities and not outside of individuals in objective reality.
- Children are believed to make meaning as a result of being stimulated by their environment (which includes teachers, other children, the community, and any other experiences they might encounter in their world).
- It is assumed that children actively make meaning for themselves; they are not passive absorbers of meaning conveyed by agents external to themselves.

This view of the child as a meaning maker is portrayed in Figure 5.1.

❖ **Figure 5.1** The child as a meaning maker.



O
S
S = Child's subjective reality
O = Child's objective reality
⟶ = Child's meaning making
- - -➤ = Environmental stimuli
= Child's perceptive function
= Child's interpretive function

In viewing children as meaning makers, four aspects of children's minds are distinguished:

1. Children's minds have contents, called "meanings," that include such things as their knowledge, beliefs, facts, theories, affiliations, fears, and hopes.
2. The contents of children's minds are stored in a "meaning structure" that contains, among other things, the organization of meaning in children's minds and the functions governing the intake, output, and redistribution of their meanings.
3. Children have perceptual filters and functions that control the types of stimuli they perceive from the many sensations that impinge on them. These filters and functions control the manner in which children perceive reality. (The vertical crosshatching on the meaning making arrow in Figure 5.1 portrays them.)
4. Children's minds have "interpretive functions" that control how they give meaning to the sensations they perceive and thus how they interpret reality. (They are portrayed by the horizontal crosshatching on the meaning making arrow in Figure 5.1.)

Children's perceptive functions, interpretive functions, and meaning structures are important to Social Reconstructionists because they affect the manner in which children perceive, interpret, and organize reality. They affect, for example, whether or not children hear certain overtones in peoples' complaints about society, how they interpret the overtones they hear, and how they give meaning to that information by fitting it into their meaning structure. While creating or teaching curricula, educators design and use instructional strategies to influence these structures and functions as well as children's meanings.

Children in Society

Children are viewed primarily as members of a social group, not as individuals. They realize their potential in social interaction with others, are educated in a social community, and act as part of a social group to bring into existence the future good society.

Two types of communities to which children belong are of interest to Social Reconstructionists: the community outside the school, in which children spend most of their life and on which they must act to reconstruct society; and the community in the school, over which the educator exercises control. Social Reconstructionists have the task of figuring out how to both (1) bring aspects of society that function outside the school into the school so that they can be used to educate children while they are in school, and (2) bring endeavors that take place during school time outside the school so that children can have firsthand experiences in their community. Bringing children's lives from outside the school into school involves dealing with all aspects of their lives, including their experiences, thoughts, feelings, dreams, and ways of relating, valuing, and acting, which are relevant both inside and outside the school.

Learning

Social Reconstructionists view learning from the perspective of constructivism. They regard learning as active assimilation of new experiences into learners' meaning structures in such a way as to force those meaning structures to accommodate to the new experiences (McLaren & Giroux, 1997, p. 34). There are two significant components of this view of learning. The first hinges on the phrase "meaning making": learning occurs when learners construct meaning out of their sensations. Learning is a process of actively assimilating and accommodating experience in such a way that it makes sense to the learner. The second component of this view of learning depends on the concept of "meaning structure": learning is based on what one already knows about the world, and it is meaningful only when it can be accommodated to one's overall conception of reality. As a result, learning must happen in the context in which what is learned occurs and in terms of what one already knows. Thus, educators

> should construct curricula that draw upon the cultural resources that students bring with them to school. This suggests not only taking the languages, histories, experiences, and voices of students seriously, but also integrating what is taught in schools with the dynamics of everyday life. This points to developing curricula that . . . address the real problems and concerns that students face on a local, societal, and global level. (Giroux, 2006, p. 6)

Meaning Making

Learners are viewed as active agents in their learning. Learning is not a passive process of incorporating objective reality into the mind by simple absorption. Learners actively choose from among their many sensory experiences those that they will become cognizant of (the perceptive function) and interpret those sensations into perceptions that have meaning in relation to their existing meaning structures (the interpretive function). As Postman and Weingartner wrote in 1969:

> We do not get our perceptions from the "things" around us. Our perceptions come from us. This does not mean that there is nothing outside of our skins. It does mean that whatever is "out there" can never be known except as it is filtered through a human nervous system. We can never get outside of our own skins. "Reality" is a perception, located somewhere behind the eyes. . . . What we perceive is largely a function of our previous experiences, our assumptions, and our purposes (i.e., needs). In other words, the perceiver decides what an object is, where it is, and why it is according to his purpose and the assumptions that he makes at any given time. You tend to perceive what you want and need to perceive, and what your past experience has led you to assume will "work" for you. . . . If rain is falling from the sky, some people will head for shelter, others will enjoy walking in it. Their perceptions of "what is happening" are different as reflected in the fact that they "do" different things. The fact that both groups will agree to the sentence "It is raining" does not mean they will perceive the "event" in the same ways. (pp. 90–91)

Both choosing which sensations to perceive and choosing how to interpret those perceptions are active functions on the part of learners and uniquely determined by their meaning structures. The subjective reality learners come to know results from their personally impressing meaning onto objective reality.

It is important to note that what learners come to know is not nature itself but nature actively interpreted through such things as the structure and lexicon of their language. Learners incorporate into themselves the stimuli impinging on them by passing them through their perceptive and interpretive functions while applying meaning-giving filters to them such as their language and modes of thinking. In McLuhanesque terms, the medium (the mind) is the message (what one knows) in the sense that the operators governing the working of the mind actively mold psychological sensations into mental perceptions.

Meaning Structure

One learns things in terms of what one already knows and in the context in which they occur.

First, it is believed that learning can take place *only* in relation to what one already knows. For experiences to make sense to a learner, they must be capable of being accommodated into the learner's meaning structure. This means that they must be of a form and contain a content that relates to both the learner's meaning structure and the totality of his or her past learning experiences. The mere occurrence of a "psychological fact" does not result in learning. It is only when the occurrence is related to other phases of the learner's experience and capable of being related to and incorporated into the learner's meaning structure that learning occurs.

It is, in fact, learners' meaning structures that give import to what they perceive. That is, whatever learners hear or see will be meaningful to them only on their own terms and not on the terms of the emitter of the information: what they learn will be a function of their past experiences, their assumptions, and their purposes—and not those of the stimulator of their sensations. This means that

> one cannot expect positive results from an educational . . . program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people. . . . The starting point for organizing the program content of education . . . must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspiration of the people. Utilizing certain basic contradictions, we must pose this existential, concrete, present situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response, not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action. (Freire, 1970, pp. 84–85)

Second, it is believed that, for valid meaning to be infused into anything, it must be learned in the context in which it occurs and in the context of a total pattern of events. The Social Reconstructionist's concern is not the acquisition and then organization of unrelated atomistic facts but rather the learning of gestalts of occurrences in organic relatedness. To be considered worthwhile, learning must be the product of insight into the patterns that relate the parts of an event to the total occurrence of the event.

The Nature of Learning

Learning has a number of important interrelated characteristics.

- Learning is primarily a social act rather than an individual act. In both process and product, in both means and ends, it aims mainly at "social self-realization" (Brameld, 1950). Learning requires not only that a social group acquire knowledge but also that it reach a consensus concerning both the nature and truth of that knowledge. Learning is always directed toward the achievement of social consensus or agreement. In fact, "the objective of the entire [learning] process is to attain a consensus upon which the group can depend and from which it can act" to reconstruct society (p. 546).

- Learning takes place in both classrooms and communities. It requires immersion in and interaction with a social group that "extends beyond the school proper into the community" (Brameld, 1950, p. 533). This means that curricula require two separate social settings for learning: inside and outside the school.
- Learning takes place through language and communication, which include such things as group discussion, talking, singing, acting, sociodrama, sculpture, group processing, and value clarification. From a practical point of view, learning through communication transforms the traditional classroom:

  > Instead of communication being limited to the imparting of indirect evidence from textbooks, pictures, or lectures, learning takes place by the reciprocal expression among students and teachers alike. The effort to *articulate* interests [feelings or thoughts] is encouraged and respected. Likewise the effort to *interpret* all evidence provided by science, art, or history replaces the passive recitation, which does virtually nothing to bring such evidence into vital relationship with one's own experience. The more that genuine back-and-forth communication takes place, the more spontaneous it becomes, and the more facile and precise the meanings that emerge. (Brameld, 1950, p. 542)

- Learning involves some form of direct experience:

  > Fundamental to learning is the kind of evidence about our wants which springs from our own experience, and of which we ourselves become directly aware. Education that fails to provide generous opportunity for such experience . . . cannot hope to reach successful practice of social consensus. (Brameld, 1950, p. 540)

- Learning is not limited to firsthand experiences, but Social Reconstructionists try to keep learning as close to firsthand experience as possible. Thus, if a group is to learn something like history, of which they cannot have firsthand experiences, educators attempt to do such things as provide firsthand accounts of occurrences or engage students in simulations that approximate experiences.
- Valuable learning requires not just thought, but also an emotional response to what is understood that includes commitment to a social position and action directed toward reconstructing society. Counts, writing in 1932, hints that learning has this tripartite nature of thought, commitment, and action when he writes that society requires learners who, while "capable of gathering and digesting facts, are at the same time able to think in terms of life, make decisions, and act" (1932b, p. 22). In the language of the last quarter of the 20th century, learning requires praxis: "reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers" (Freire, 1970, p. 75).
- Learning requires interaction of learners with the environment outside themselves. The learner must actively interact with someone or some situation to make meaning. In terms of Figure 5.1, the learner (S) does not learn in isolation from stimuli coming from an outside reality (0). Rather, the learner learns as a result of his or her meaning making endeavors by engaging and interacting with stimuli from an outside source. That is, there must be a learner (S) actively interacting with an outside reality (0) for meaning to be made and learning to take place within the learner. Interactive learning best occurs in social groups where both the group affects the learner and the learner affects the group. Here it is important that "children . . . continually share in a social environment which they enrich by that sharing, and which enriches them" (Brameld, 1950, p. 533).

Teaching

At one level, the intent of teaching is to reconstruct society. At another level the intent of teaching is to stimulate students to reconstruct themselves so that they can contribute to the reconstruction of society. At still another level the intent of teaching is to stimulate students to learn *how* to reconstruct society. Stimulating students to learn how to reconstruct society involves helping them construct a set of meanings, meaning structures, perceptive functions, and interpretive functions so that when they encounter social problems they can analyze and understand them, formulate a vision of better society where those problems do not exist, and act in such a way as to eliminate those social problems.

It is important to note that it is not just students' meanings that Social Reconstructionists want to have an impact on. They want to stimulate students to construct a *method* of perceiving and interpreting social events, developing a social vision, and acting that will allow them to confront as yet unknown future social crises. Providing students with a method is critical. Given the Social Reconstruction belief in social relativity, it is important that students be taught an *approach* to confronting social problems rather than a fixed formula that has proved useful in confronting past or present social problems. Society's past and present condition is not the only consideration here—at stake is society's future.

Social Reconstructionists use a variety of instructional methods. The two discussed here are the discussion and experience methods. Both depend on having students learn indirectly through the media they encounter while engaging in educational activities, media whose overt messages may not be their most important ones.

The Discussion Method

Group discussion is a social means of educating a group of persons. It requires both a social context and social interactions. It is considered an ideal educational medium because it uses language to help groups and individuals construct and reconstruct their knowledge of themselves, their knowledge of society and its strengths and weaknesses, a vision of a future good society, and a strategy for transforming the current society into the future good society. Here language is viewed broadly as a primary mediator of human perception, learning, knowing, feeling, and acting.

The discussion method of teaching involves engaging a group of students in a conversation while the teacher elicits "from students the meanings that they have already stored up so that they may subject those meanings to a testing and verifying, reordering and reclassifying, modifying and extending process" (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 62). The assumption underlying this mode of teaching is that for students to reconstruct their already established knowledge and ways of knowing, they must regurgitate them so that they can be examined and reconstructed during the discussion process. Group discussion accomplishes this transformation and reconstruction of knowledge by getting participants to disclose to the group their social understanding so that the group can help them reconstruct their social knowledge in light of the knowledge of the group as a whole. Knowledge can thus be reaffirmed and elaborated by the group to give greater insight into it; shown to be inaccurate or incorrect, so that it can be made accurate or correct by the group's pointing out of its errors; shown to be inadequate because it lacks connection to appropriate social values, so that it can be made more adequate through group processes; or shown to be deficient because it lacks the necessary commitment and inspiration, so that the group can help develop such in the participant. The process involves getting participants to expose their knowledge to the group so that the group can comment on that knowledge in such a way as to allow participants to reconstruct their knowledge in light of the group's comments and peer pressure—all under the careful guidance of teachers who differentially reinforce group understandings and values to guide the group to acquire understandings and values consistent with those of the teacher.

The content for a discussion comes from those involved in the discussion. It is a re-presentation to the group by its members of things they have experienced or already understood and now want to understand more or in a new way. Thus, the actual social experiences and knowledge of those involved in the dialogue are crucial. The discussion is defined by those experiences and that knowledge and must take into account those experiences and that knowledge as the persons who have had them perceive them. Although the discussion is defined by the perceived experiences and knowledge of its participants, it is not limited by those experiences and that knowledge, because the social interactions that take place during a discussion can expand on the experiences of its participants (as when two people's thoughts are joined together to generate a new thought neither would have been capable of generating alone) and because the group can re-present the experiences of participants back to them so that they can see them in a new way and thus perceive, experience, or construct them anew (as when one person's interpretation of the meaning of a particular experience allows another person who has had a similar experience to understand that experience in a new way).

Important here is "starting where the people are" and participants' prior social experiences and knowledge (Adams, 1972, p. 516). Social Reconstructionists believe that a discussion (and a person's education) must start where the participants are; must start with what people have experienced and what they understand, as they themselves perceive them; and must relate to their prior experiences and knowledge. As a result, Social Reconstructionists must either find a way to tap into the prior experiences and knowledge of those who will experience a curriculum or find a way to provide them with the experiences and knowledge the curriculum will build on. Important here is the centrality of the social experiences and knowledge of those participating in the discussion. Anything said during the discussion as well as any input into the discussion from sources such as outside experts, books, movies, or the like must relate to the prior experiences and knowledge of participants if they are to benefit from them.

At their best, group discussions have three crucial components: thought, commitment, and action. The potential for all three must be present in a group discussion for it to be vital. If a group discussion lacks the potential for action, then the thinking that takes place during it degenerates into useless verbalism. If a group discussion lacks the potential for thought, then the action that takes place as a result of it degenerates into meaningless activism (Freire, 1970, pp. 75–77). If a group discussion lacks the potential for commitment, then the thinking that takes place during it will lack the power to be transformed into action. If a group discussion does not carry the potential for thought about society as it is and as it ought to be, the potential for commitment to transforming current society as it is into society as it ought to be, and the potential for action directed toward such, then the discussion is not vital within the context of the Social Reconstruction ideology.

Social Reconstruction group discussions take place at two levels: (1) an "explicit" level at which students are openly challenged by analysis of the present social crisis and vision of the future good society, and (2) a "hidden" level at which students are subconsciously conditioned by group norms to have a particular social perspective and set of social values. At the explicit level of discussion, students are aware of the messages being communicated to them and they consciously and with understanding construct their concepts and conceptual structures. At this level, they are aware of their decisions and choices and what is happening to them while they are being educated. At the hidden level, educators manipulate the "hidden curriculum" to subconsciously condition students to a way of viewing, valuing, and judging what they experience by subtly socializing them to the educators' perspectives on the world. At this level, the rules and norms of the group discussion educate members without their understanding what is occurring.

When operating at the explicit level, discussion tends to proceed by having students learn about society, verbally analyze society, explicitly formulate a vision of a future society, develop a social conscience that impels them to commit themselves to transform the existing society into the future better society, and decide how to act to implement the future good society. At this level, instruction depends on the power of ideas to move students to reconstruct themselves and society. The belief is that if people think about and understand the reasons for a reconstructed society, they will act in such a manner as to bring it into existence.

When operating at the hidden level, the discussion process and the social environment in which the discussion takes place mold students to think and act in accordance with an educator's beliefs. During discussions, teachers provide the rules for discussion, the desired social perspective and values, and the model for the modes of thinking in which students are to engage. The instructive function is embedded in the language, questions, evidence, value judgments, modes of argumentation, and criteria of relevance the teacher uses during discussion and urges students to use by example. Thus, if "sharing" (as compared to competing) is valued, sharing (and the belief that sharing is good) will be directly conditioned into students during the discussion by their being required to conform to discussion norms that demand sharing behavior and censor competitive behavior. Similarly, if "critical analysis" of social forces is valued, critical analysis will be demonstrated by teachers, students' engagement in critical analysis will be rewarded by teachers, and students will learn critical analysis by conforming to discussion norms that value and reward critical analysis. In these cases, the norms of the discussion and the behaviors expected during the discussion become forces that mold students. Here it is the medium (the discussion itself) more than the message (the topic of discussion) that is designed to provide the teaching.

The Experience Method

Social Reconstructionists believe that it is from one's experiences *with* (and knowledge of) an existing social crisis and in response to a perceived difficulty that one has experienced *within* that social crisis that one is motivated to understand the nature of society, envision a better society, and act to reconstruct society. This means that one's experiences (and related knowledge) play a crucial role in the Social Reconstruction ideology. It also means that *if* Social Reconstructionists want group participants to acquire a particular understanding of a social crisis *and* they have not already experienced that crisis, *then* they must provide for those participants appropriate experiences that will result in the corresponding appropriate understandings. This is why Myles Horton insisted that participants at Highlander have experiences with exploited laborers before attending Highlander. This is also why the teacher in the sixth-grade mathematics classroom described earlier referred to well-defined student experiences in the community, took students on field trips, and had them engage in simulations.

Important here is that students obtain more than knowledge from a social experience. They also acquire feelings (including feelings about such things as their self-concept and their power to act and make a difference in their world), a social perspective, and a set of values about what is socially just or unjust, good or bad, fair or unfair, right or wrong.

The experience method involves placing students in an environment where they encounter a social crisis and learn from those who usually function in that environment. Experiences that students might participate in include public protests, recycling, visiting the elderly in nursing homes, rehabilitating public places in depressed urban or rural areas, and working with battered women, the homeless, or the poor in shelters. The environments in which students are placed and those with whom they work are specially chosen to educate students about particular social problems. It is assumed that students will absorb the attitudes and values, modes of perception and interpretation, and worldview of those normally engaged in the environment—because they will experience firsthand the reasons for these perspectives and because they will get carried away by the immediacy of the experience in such a manner that they will reconstruct themselves to be like the people who normally function in the environment. Here teaching involves the provision of firsthand experience with social crises; counseling sessions designed to help students adjust to the environment in which they find themselves; and discussion sessions intended to help them construct meaning from their experiences. Counseling and discussion sessions are a crucial part of the experience method, for in these sessions students are debriefed and reconstruct their previously held beliefs.

The Teacher as Colleague

Social Reconstructionists view the teacher as a colleague or companion whom students can look up to rather than as an authority who has control over them. The teacher and the students are considered to be on the same side of both the discussion and the experience. They are allied against the evils of the world. They complement each other rather than combat each other. They teach and learn from each other: "There are not teachers and students, but teacher-students, and student-teachers" (Freire, 1970, p. 67).

The teacher is not viewed as knowing everything and the students as knowing nothing; rather, both bring experiences to share with each other during instruction. It is not that the teacher actively thinks and the students passively absorb; rather, both actively engage in meaning making in the presence of each other. It is not that the teacher talks and the students listen; rather, both talk and listen as partners in a mutual endeavor. It is not that the teacher chooses content and the students accept it; rather, both have experiences that contribute to the content of instruction. It is not that only students reveal their inner meanings to the group for analysis; rather, both students and teachers contribute their inner meanings to the group for scrutiny for both their own and the group's educational benefit. It is not that teachers teach and the students learn; rather, both teach each other and learn from each other. It is not that teachers are emotionally disengaged and detached from discussions and experiences; rather, both teachers and students become emotionally engaged in learning and present to each other their thoughts and values—and these responses are considered interconnected. As Freire writes, "authentic education is not carried on by 'A' *for* 'B' or by 'A' *about* 'B,' but rather by 'A' *with* 'B,' mediated by the world" (1970, p. 82).

Characteristics of Teaching

Several characteristics of what Social Reconstructionists consider good teaching are common to both the discussion and experience methods.

- Both are group methods and make use of group pressures to teach students. Not only are the messages often social, but also the medium used to convey the messages is a social medium.
- Both methods depend on the relevance of their message in students' lives. In the experience method, relevance comes from the immediacy of the situation in which students find themselves. In the discussion method, topics often come from the expressed concerns of students.
- In both methods, teachers find out what students know, draw it out of them, and help them reflect, analyze, and reconstruct their meanings in a value-laden context—where values shape much of what and how students learn.
- The important messages in both methods are often subliminal ones conveyed through the learning medium—such as the rules of proper discussion or the proper values (for instance, social justice) with which to view and interpret experiences.

Characteristics of Teachers

Three characteristics of teachers deserve mention, beyond those implied in the above discussion.

Social Reconstructionists view the attitudes, interpretations, and visions of teachers to be of crucial importance:

> There can be no significant innovation in education that does not have at its center the attitude of teachers. . . . The beliefs, feelings, and assumptions of teachers are the air of a learning environment; they determine the quality of life within it. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 33)

Teachers must be capable of reflecting on themselves and on their society and of using critical analysis to "raise fundamental questions about the social, economic, and political forces shaping their lives and the lives of their students so that they can all be better prepared for participating in—and changing—the larger world" (McLaren, 2007, p. 192). That is, they must be "able to critically analyze the ideologies, values, and interests that inform their role as teachers and the cultural politics they promote in the classroom" (Giroux, 2006, p. 7); "able to analyze their relationship with the larger society in order to critically apprehend themselves as social agents capable of recognizing how they might be complicitous with forms of oppression and human suffering" (Giroux, 2006, p. 7); able to analyze the deep cultural, social, political, and economic forces that contribute to injustice and inequality in their society; and able to envision a future better society and act to bring it into existence. Giroux sums this up when he says that teachers are

> transformative intellectuals. . . . They understand the nature of their own self-formation, [understand the nature of their society,] have some vision of the future, see the importance of education as a public discourse, and have a sense of mission in providing students with what they need to become critical citizens. . . . They believe something, say what they believe, and offer their belief to others in a framework that always makes it debatable and open to critical inquiry. . . . Above all, [they are] . . . able to exercise power. Pedagogy is always related to power . . . to shaping public life and school relationships. (1992, p. 15)

Social Reconstructionists believe that teachers should be "qualified to provide . . . vigorous, enlightened, and public-spirited . . . leadership, ready and competent to challenge the power of selfish interests and to champion the cause of the masses of the people" (Counts, 1934, p. 558). This means both that teachers must be "people on fire with an awareness of injustice and the determination to correct it" (Adams & Horton, 1975, p. 501) and that "teachers should deliberately reach for power and then make the most of their conquest" (Counts, 1932b, p. 28)—that teachers should be leaders rather than followers.

Knowledge

The Social Construction of Knowledge

Social Reconstructionists view worthwhile knowledge to be a social construction. Here, "knowledge (truth) is socially constructed, culturally mediated, and historically situated . . . [and] dominant [social] discourses determine what counts as true, important, and relevant" (McLaren, 2007, p. 210). In addition, worthwhile knowledge is viewed as being constructed out of social interactions for social, political, economic, or cultural purposes:

> Knowledge is a *social construction* deeply rooted in a nexus of power relations[;] . . . it is a product of agreement or consent between individuals who live out particular social relations (e.g., of class, race, and gender) and who live in particular junctures in time. . . . [T]he world we live in is constructed symbolically by the mind through social interaction with others and is heavily dependent on culture, context, custom, and historical specificity. . . . [S]ome constructions of reality are legitimated and celebrated by the dominant culture while others clearly are not. . . . [S]ome forms of knowledge have more power and legitimacy than

> others. For instance, in many schools . . . science and math . . . are favored over the liberal arts. This can be explained by the link between the needs of big business to compete in world markets and the [social] imperative . . . to bring "excellence" back to the schools. (pp. 196–197)

Knowledge and Value

Knowledge is a "value-laden social construction" (Joseph, Bravmann, Windschitl, Mikel, & Green, 2000, p. 146). It embodies both truth and value. It embraces both intelligence and a corresponding moral stance with respect to that intelligence (whether in the form of meaning, functions, or structures). Knowledge and values are interconnected. This interconnection has its origin in Social Reconstructionists' view of reality from the perspective of current social crisis and a future good society. By processing reality through a vision of a future good society, intelligence becomes good or bad, worthwhile or worthless, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical (Giroux, 2005, pp. 29, 67), emancipatory or oppressive (McLaren, 2007, p. 198) as it supports or refutes an educator's utopian vision. Values and intelligence are considered real in the same way, and little differentiation is made between the questions "Is *x* real?" and "Is *x* moral?" A scientific fact (political interpretation, religious hope, or affiliative emotion) is judged by the question, "Is it worthwhile intelligence with respect to the analysis of the existing society and projection of the future society?" Knowledge is not an impartial quantity and knowing is not a neutral affair. Knowledge is of worth because it contributes to the attainment of a future good society, and the construction of knowledge is a moral activity inseparable from the cultural activity of searching for and implementing a satisfactory vision for the future good society.

Knowledge and Reality

Social Reconstructionists distinguish between subjective reality and objective reality. They believe that worthwhile knowledge resides within the subjective reality of both individuals and society. For them,

> there is no such thing as "subject matter" in the abstract. "Subject matter" exists in the minds of perceivers. And what each one thinks it is, is what it is. We have been acting in schools as if knowledge lies outside the learner, which is why we have the kinds of curricula . . . we have. But knowledge . . . is what *we* know *after* we have learned. It is an outcome of perception and is as unique and subjective as any other perception. (Postman & Weingartner, 1969, p. 92)

Worthwhile knowledge does not reside outside of people in such things as books or magazines. It does not reside in "words" separate from people. It resides in the meanings people create for themselves. Knowledge is defined in terms of the subjective meaning it has to its possessors. For Social Reconstructionists, what society and people believe to be true and valuable is more important than what might be true or valuable in any absolute sense.

Knowledge resides in its possessor, originates in that possessor's environmental interactions, and is what each person interprets knowledge to be within the context of a relativistic social consensus. This is a crucial assumption. Knowledge's truth and worth are verifiable through social consensus. What the majority of the members of a society believe to be true is true for those persons:

> The truth of those experiences most vital in the social life of any culture are determined . . . by the extent to which they are *agreed upon* by the largest possible number of the group concerned. Without this factor of agreement or consensus, the experience simply is not "true." (Brameld, 1950, p. 456)

Knowledge is relativistic in nature, and its truth and value depend upon the society within which it exists. For Social Reconstructionists, there is no such thing as absolute knowledge that is true for all peoples under all circumstances in all cultures.

This does not mean that some knowledge is not better for certain purposes and certain peoples than other knowledge. That knowledge which supports educators' analysis of our past and current society and vision of the future good society is the knowledge of most worth to them. It is that knowledge which educators desire their society to accept and acquire through social consensus.

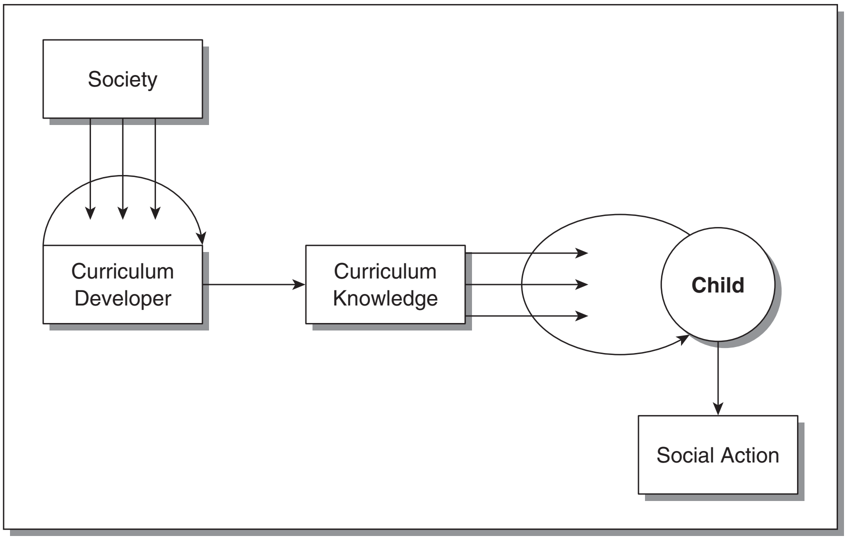
The Creation of Knowledge

In discussing the creation of knowledge, two cases need to be distinguished: the creation of knowledge by members of society and the creation of curriculum knowledge.

Members of society create the knowledge they possess. Knowledge does not come into existence by itself and passively reside in objective reality. It comes into existence when someone actively impresses meaning on sensory data, and it resides within the subjective consciousness of its possessor. The process by which a person actively loads meaning and value onto sensory data is the process by which knowledge is created. Sensory data or objective information without meaning and value loaded onto it by a person is not called knowledge. As such, the meaning structure, the perceptive functions, and the interpretive functions of a person are crucial to Social Reconstructionists. They are the operators that give meaning and value to the knowledge a person creates. In many ways, it is these meaning-giving operators that educators wish to orient toward their future good society. In so doing, educators bring the knower to share their vision of the future rather than simply cause him or her to be informed about that vision.

The knowledge curriculum developers embed in their curricula has its origin in their subjective interpretation of the nature of society in the past, present, and future. It derives from educators' personal analysis of their world. It is chosen for inclusion in curriculum because it acts to convert the child into a participant in the developers' visions of the future good society. It is embedded in curriculum with the intention of aligning children's knowledge and ways of knowing with those of developers and of activating children to reconstruct society. This view of the source of curriculum knowledge is portrayed in Figure 5.2. Note here that curriculum knowledge has its origin in educators' subjective view of society and that it is specifically directed toward affecting the subjective consciousness of children so as to make them into change agents who swell the social consensus that will in turn hopefully align society with educators' visions. Objective information, such as that possessed by the academic disciplines, is of little use to these educators, except as value can be loaded onto it so that it supports their vision of the future good society. Academic skills are also of little use except as they can be used as analytical tools for the purpose of reconstructing the knowledge base of individuals and their societies. This leads some Reconstructionists to even believe that the "enlightenment notion of reason needs to be reformulated . . . because [it denies] . . . its own historical construction and ideological principals" (Giroux, 2005, p. 70).

❖ **Figure 5.2** The Social Reconstruction view of the source of curriculum knowledge.



Characteristics of Knowledge

Six other attributes of knowledge need mention.

1. Knowledge is not viewed as a purely intellectual quantity. Both people's "gut" knowledge and their "intellectual" knowledge are important and interdependent. Both their "unrational" (subconscious) and their "rational" (conscious) knowledge are valued.
2. Knowledge is both cognitive and experiential in nature. Knowledge is not just "information about" but also "experience with" a subject. Knowledge is based both in people's experiences and in their ability to understand those experiences.
3. Although knowledge is a personal attribute of the perceiver, Social Reconstructionists are concerned with the knowledge possessed by society. Educators wish to reconstruct society by reconstructing the social consensus of the masses—the summative total of the knowledge held by the many individuals who make up society.
4. Social Reconstructionists take a gestalt approach to knowledge, viewing it in relation to other knowledge. Knowledge has meaning and value because it fits into a structure or pattern. Individual bits of information, atomistically unrelated to any organizing theme or vision, have little value.

5. Social Reconstructionism views knowledge as "interdisciplinary in nature" and questions "the fundamental categories of all disciplines" (Giroux, 1992, p. 10). It creates "new forms of knowledge through its emphasis on breaking down disciplinary boundaries and creating new spheres in which knowledge can be produced" (Giroux, 2005, p. 69). As Giroux emphasizes, "the struggle over the production and creation of knowledge" is "an . . . issue . . . of power, ethics, and politics" (p. 69).
6. Social Reconstructionists highlight the ethical and political dimensions of knowledge and its use by emphasizing that schools "must be seen as places where culture, power, and knowledge come together to produce . . . a vision of the future," a vision that determines what knowledge we consider to be true, ethical, emancipatory, and worthwhile (Giroux, 2006, pp. 4–5).

Evaluation

Social Reconstructionists do not usually use formal objective evaluation during curriculum development. They primarily use subjective evaluation.

They recommend a gestalt field theory approach to the evaluation of both curricula and students. Questions asked are not of the form "How does curriculum *z* or student *y* measure up to standard *m*?" but rather of the form "How does curriculum *z* or student *y* measure up to standard *m* in a particular circumstance?" This is necessary because the particular time, place, and setting in which social crises are confronted are constantly changing, as are the students confronting them, and it is believed that the only valid assessments are those made under real-world circumstances.

Evaluation is not a simple comparison of expected outcomes to achieved outcomes, but rather a comparison of the evaluee—whether curriculum or student—to both expectations and to the field in which the evaluee functions. In the case of curriculum evaluation, this involves taking account of the social environment in which the curriculum is examined. In the case of student evaluation, this involves taking account of both the student's performance and the student's ability to perform. For example, in evaluating a child's self-concept with respect to the variable "power over environment," one would use a function including the following parameters: the power the child exhibits, the power the child is capable of possessing, the power the child thinks other children have, and the power the child thinks he or she has. Here the relation is between (1) the power the child possesses compared to the power available to him, and (2) the power the child thinks he has compared to the power he thinks he is capable of possessing.

For Social Reconstructionists, summative student evaluation and curriculum evaluation are inextricably tied together in the particular social environment in which students live. As Horton says, the measure of a curriculum's "effectiveness—perhaps the only valid one—comes when a workshop participant returns home. Many never become active. Others become devoted to fundamental social change" (Adams & Horton, 1975, pp. 215–216). Here curriculum is evaluated through student performance outside of school. The same holds true for student evaluation. What students learn is thought to be testable only in their everyday life outside of school as they work to reconstruct themselves and society in light of the curriculum's vision of the future good society.

During instruction, and particularly during group discussions, teachers provide students with feedback about their meanings, meaning structures, perceptive functions, and interpretive functions—for the purpose of helping students gain insight that will enable them to reconstruct and transform those meanings, meaning structures, perceptive functions, and interpretive functions and become more insightful and powerful in analyzing, understanding, envisioning, and acting in social situations. Evaluation and feedback are for the purpose of aiding students in reconstructing themselves so that they can in turn aid in the reconstruction of society.

Concluding Perspective

The Social Reconstruction ideology has done much to introduce knowledge of the social dimensions of education to our schools, helping us comprehend that education is a social process, that the hidden curriculum has enormous influence on learners, and that all knowledge carries with it social values. It has brought to the attention of educators the realization that they must take value stances themselves and that they must attend to the social, political, and moral values of the children they teach. Social Reconstructionism's insistence that schools consider the problems of our society and the injustices done to its members has had a powerful effect on schools and added an important dimension to their academic and vocational concerns. This ideology laid the seeds for the ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that help children deal with issues such as civil rights, racial and gender bias, and environmental pollution.

The ideology's influence on education formally began in 1932 when George Counts attacked the Learner Centered ideology for not attending to our society's problems and the injustices done to its members, asking, "Dare the school build a new social order?" This led to a split in the Progressive Education Association between advocates of the Social Reconstruction and Learner Centered ideologies—and was the blow that initiated the decline of the Learner Centered ideology's influence on education. Members of the ideology published numerous social justice textbooks during the Great Depression that deeply influenced schools. The ideology's influence declined during World War II and the McCarthy era. Social Reconstructionism regained its influence in the 1960s and 1970s through its involvement in educational programs supporting the civil rights movement, the women's movement, desegregation, Vietnam War protests, nuclear weapons and energy protests, and the early environmental pollution (recycling) movement. Its influence on schools lessened in the 1980s but began to grow again as the World War II generation of faculty began to retire and be replaced by critical theorists, postmodernists, social constructivists, and social justice advocates. At the beginning of the 21st century, large numbers of Social Reconstructionists were found on the faculties of schools of education promoting a social justice agenda and attempting to influence the next generation of teachers. By 2007 the ideology had begun to come under attack for its social justice agenda; however, environmental pollution and the energy crisis are possible prime issues for a newly reconfigured Social Reconstruction agenda. Figure 5.3 provides a rough estimation of those times when advocates of this ideology have been most active, with respect to their own norms, in attempting to influence American education.