

# Introduction

## Understanding Social Foundations of Education

### Summary

This introduction familiarizes students to the academic field of inquiry and study known as educational foundations. The suggested historical readings provide the rationalizations put forward by the field’s original intellectual leadership, and explain why they chose to situate their field of study in teacher education programs.

### Objectives

- Understand the intellectual vision for and academic framework of educational foundations
- Explain the social context of and differences between education and schooling
- Explain the purposes of social reconstruction and ideology critique
- Explain how teachers may act as agents of social change through democratic education
- Recognize the ideological nature of education and schooling
- Understand key terms: Social foundations of education, social reconstruction, ideology, ideology critique, praxis, social intelligence, critical analysis, criticisms of positivist methods of research, social justice

### What Is Social Foundations of Education?

What is social foundations of education and why do we see this field of academic study in colleges and schools of education today? Conceptualizing the past and the future from the precipice of the Great Depression and the rapid social and industrial changes taking place, George Counts outlined the social reconstructionists’ agenda in the group’s 1934 inaugural publication of *The Social Frontier*. Criticizing the overwhelming use of positivist research methods prevalent in the social sciences, Counts declared “absolute objectivity and detachment” in human affairs to be untenable. Mere scientific observation and description (positivist research methods) left academia with few tools to critique and normatively evaluate inequalities and injustices

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Timeline 0.1 The development of social foundations of education as a field of academic study

brought about by the rise of Nazism in Germany and the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> Because educators are uniquely positioned to foster critical thinking skills in students, the social reconstructionists developed an academic field of study they referred to as Social Foundations in Education, wherein education students could develop “the kind of perspective that the sociological imagination advocated by [C. Wright] Mills ... offers ... in order to place the educational system in a context,” according to Alan R. Sadovnik, Peter W. Cookson, Jr., and Susan F. Semel. Why? Because “such a context or framework is necessary to understand the schools and teacher’s place within them, to understand how the schools relate to other aspects of society, and to see how educational problems are related to larger societal dilemmas.” As these authors continue, “seeing the schools in their context will enhance ... understanding of how the schools today reflect the historical evolution of reform efforts as well as how current debates frame what the schools will look like for each successive generation of teachers and students.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is no coincidence that the social reconstructionists emerged following the creation of “Germany’s Frankfurt Institute of Social Research in 1923 whose shared purpose included the development of a critical theory dedicated to moving academia beyond so-called objective methodologies that merely described and explained social, historical, economic, and cultural phenomena.” Both groups’ interests overlapped, as did a few of its members (Brian W. Dotts, “Social Foundations in Exile: How Dare the School Build a New Social Order,” *Journal of Educational Foundations* 28, nos. 1–4 (2015): 53–54.).

<sup>2</sup> Alan R. Sadovnik, Peter W. Cookson, Jr., and Susan F. Semel “Understanding Education: The Foundations Perspective,” in *Exploring Education: An Introduction to the Foundations of Education* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 14.

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The founders of the field believed teachers were a positive force in society in that they could develop important critical thinking skills in their students. Counts envisioned teachers as key actors in the development of a broader “social intelligence” that could lay the foundation for a meaningful democracy in search of social justice. In other words, this cadre of intellectuals at Teachers College, Columbia University, began to question the value of simply transmitting an uncritical view of society in the nation’s schools. Education, they believed, must include more than mere cultural transmission, as necessary as this is. They viewed education as developing new possibilities, societal improvements, individual growth, democratic collaboration, and social justice.

Not to be confused with advocating revolution, social reconstructionists called upon teachers to serve as active agents of *constructive social change*. *Social intelligence* was a term often used by this group, which illustrates the broader (or perhaps deeper) expectations for teacher preparation programs in developing a heightened awareness of schools as social and political institutions. In other words, the focus on social intelligence signified an attempt to foster among teachers a deeper understanding of the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts of education and schooling. They believed that teacher preparation and the schools teachers were serving in did not take place in a vacuum, but were the result of social factors and political ideologies that aided the interests of powerful groups. According to John Dewey, “To prepare individuals to take part intelligently in the management of conditions under which they will live, to bring them to an understanding of the forces which are moving to equip them with the intellectual and practiced tools by which they can themselves enter into direction of these forces,” served the essence of education.<sup>3</sup> The reconstructionists’ plans were immediately and vehemently opposed by several reactionary groups.

As history has illustrated on numerous occasions since Socrates’ trial and death during the fifth century BC, critical thinking often threatens powerful groups who benefit from the status quo. Analyzing dominant institutions and the ideologies that justify their existence can often reveal harmful motives, ulterior intentions, and explicit and subtle forms of oppression and injustice, as well as institutional forms of discrimination. More recently, the historian Richard Hofstadter made the following assertion when describing what he refers to as an anti-intellectual strain in America:

To those who suspect that intellect is a subversive force in society, it will not do to reply that intellect is really a safe, bland, and emollient thing. In a certain sense the suspicious Tories and militant philistines are right: intellect is dangerous. Left free, there is nothing it will not reconsider, analyze, throw into question.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> William B. Stanley, “Education for Social Reconstruction in Critical Context.” In *Social Reconstruction: People, Politics, Perspectives*, ed. Karen L. Riley (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 45.

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The Great Depression caused many to reassess established American institutions, particularly capitalism and how its negative outcomes reverberated well beyond the market. In response, the social reconstructionists found a home in social foundations programs in various academic institutions including its first department in Columbia University’s Teachers College. The intellectuals composing this initial group included but were not limited to John Dewey, Harold Rugg, William Kilpatrick, Charles Beard, Margaret Mead, George Counts, Robert M. Hutchins, and W. F. Ogburn. America’s social reconstructionists published many of their educational ideas and philosophies in two renowned literary journals, *The Social Frontier* (1934–1939) and *Frontiers of Democracy* (1939–1943). A review of these journals illustrates a deep concern for social justice and the desire to break through rigid and narrower ideologies that often prevented positive change. These scholars criticized the popular positivistic methods used in the social sciences by highlighting the fallibility of objective and neutral research, and the importance of utilizing normative analyses to address and remedy social problems. See Table 0.1 for a list of the founders of the field.

Critique, reflection, and action (often referred to as *praxis*), are intrinsically educational and go far beyond the mere transmission of culture. The social reconstructionists laid out their three broad goals in their initial publication (the first issue of *The Social Frontier*), which is included in the Further Reading list below. First, having made the connection between educators and praxis, the social reconstructionists situated their academic objectives in teacher preparation institutions and specifically in social foundations programs where they believed the field could be supported and cultivated, and could germinate in succeeding generations of teachers an appreciation for and commitment to praxis. Second, Counts framed this pursuit as an attempt to affirm and actualize for everyone the moral claims put forth in the Declaration of Independence; namely, “that ‘all men are created equal’ and are entitled to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’” Populist movements, emancipation of slaves, women’s rights, workers’

Table 0.1 Well-known original social reconstructionists

| Original founders of educational foundations (social reconstructionists) | Scholarly specialization              | Primary university                        |
|--|---------------------------------------|---|
| George Counts  | Sociology of Education                | Columbia University                       |
| William Kilpatrick   | Philosophy of Education               | Columbia University                       |
| Charles Beard  | History                               | Columbia University                       |
| John Dewey   | Philosophy of Education               | Columbia University                       |
| Theodore Brameld   | Philosophy of Education               | New York University and Boston University |
| Harold Rugg  | Psychology and Sociology of Education | Columbia University                       |

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rights, and the Civil Rights Movement, among others, have all served as important edu-  
cative and often extra-constitutional movements that illustrate the importance of criti-  
cal thinking and social justice. Third, despite criticism among “patriotic” groups during  
the Great Depression who reviled questioning the status quo, social reconstructionists  
were devoted to critically and normatively critiquing society, its institutions, and its  
ideologies. Paralleling the intent of Hofstadter’s quote above, the social reconstruction-  
ists declared that “Every important educational event, institution, theory, and program”  
would be subject to “critical review,” in order to fulfill the final goal of social recon-  
structionists: identifying and remedying the root causes of social injustice in order to  
move us in the direction of a “democratic ideal.” While factions existed within the social  
reconstructionist movement, it was generally believed that this “curriculum would be  
designed to expose the anti-democratic limitations of individualism, market economic  
theory, and promote a strong version of participatory democracy and a more collectivist  
economic system to reduce disparities of income, wealth, and power,” according to W.  
B. Stanley (2006, 94).

For Counts and other social reconstructionists, education (as opposed to mere train-  
ing) should not be static; it is a fundamental and existential aspect of a broader culture’s  
“process of evolution,” and what is unique about education is its ability to rise above,  
beyond, or perhaps, to broaden the horizons of what otherwise appear to be an objective  
reality operating behind the backs of citizens. Social reconstruction, as the name sug-  
gests, had “no desire to promote a restricted and technical professionalism,” according  
to Counts. To rely merely on the administration of existing institutions would simply  
and gratuitously perpetuate the status quo and ignore existing injustices. In his appeal  
to “thinking men,” Harold Rugg quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson in his advocacy for social  
foundations of education: “Without action thought can never ripen into truth.”

Social foundations programs include the following academic frameworks when ana-  
lyzing schooling and education in societies:

|                         |                       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| History                 | Philosophy            |
| Sociology               | Political Science     |
| Economics               | Anthropology          |
| Multiculturalism        | Literary Critique     |
| Constitutional Law      | Policy Studies        |
| International Education | Comparative Education |

Social foundations programs  
throughout the United States and  
elsewhere have, since the 1930s,  
helped prepare future teachers  
(in p-12 and higher educational  
settings) with the conceptual  
tools needed to critique formal  
and informal schooling and the  
broader educative forces in soci-

ety. Social foundations of education utilizes academic disciplines in the social sciences  
and humanities such as history, philosophy, political science, anthropology, sociology,  
multiculturalism, literary analysis, law and policy to understand the complexities of  
formal and informal educational settings and their connections to the broader society.  
In other words, by using a conceptual and academic framework provided by fields in the

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arts and sciences, social foundations programs prepare educators to self-reflect critically on their teaching practices and ideas in order to understand their practice as part of a larger set of social and institutional contexts. As a social foundations course, we will examine, analyze, and critique American education and schooling historically, philosophically, politically, sociologically, and culturally throughout this book. The goal is to provide future teachers with a thoughtful, critical, and contextually rich understanding of their profession and its relation to education and schooling in the broader society.

### Philosophical Perspectives in This Book

#### “The unexamined life is not worth living”

At the beginning of the fourth century BC, Socrates is quoted as declaring, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates’ commitment to the critical examination of assumptions, cultural norms and mores, ideological worldviews, and beliefs, resulting in his ultimate state-imposed death, begins a historical record that illustrates the fear those who practice critical thinking inspire among powerful groups. Famous historical figures who shared Socrates’ fate or who were jailed for their critiques include Jesus Christ, Galileo Galilei, Algernon Sidney, John Brown, Nat Turner, Sitting Bull, Ernesto “Che” Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcom X, and Mohandas Gandhi, just to name a few. In fact, the philosophers and theorists included in this text all follow Socrates’ example in varying degrees. They all offer and/or implement radical proposals for positive change, despite the fact that we may disagree with the practicality of their ideas during their lifetimes.

The first section of this text begins with Socrates (or Plato’s description of him), his method of inquiry, including what has been referred to as the Socratic Method. This deliberative exercise consists of a dialectical exchange of questions followed by answers, and additional questioning intended to bring about the fragility of accepted beliefs among the participants involved in the exchange. Socrates sets the stage as he set the stage for the subsequent Western tradition of philosophical inquiry. Included in this chapter is a discussion of Plato’s main ideas related to the polity, epistemology, and education. As a student of Socrates, Plato wrote extensively about his mentor, but he differed from him in a variety of ways. For instance, Plato focused on developing a theoretical ideal state, the Republic, in which he maps out what he thinks to be the best social and political structure for a just society. Unlike Socrates, Plato discusses public education in detail offering his prescriptions for organization of schooling, its purposes, and a curriculum. Education in Plato’s Republic, much like other institutions, is developed with the ideal state in mind. Coverage of Plato also includes his thoughts on relativism and absolutism and how the latter informed his ideal Republic. Plato’s famous Allegory of the Cave serves as the description of his epistemology and how human beings learn, and having predetermined what an ideal republic looks like, Plato’s censorship of educational material is also discussed. The third philosopher covered in

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Chapter 1 is Aristotle, a student of Plato's. In contrast to his mentor, Aristotle adopted a more practical approach, believing that political and social structures must rely upon greater individual agency, which includes a discussion of his notion of *telos*, the process of becoming. Aristotle's explanation of humans (or other species) always in the process of becoming is consistent with his emphasis on the importance of human experience, both metaphysical and practical experience. This is why Aristotle places so much importance on the notion that human beings are social and political animals whose true selves cannot be realized without experiencing a robust civic life. It is from these premises that Aristotle develops the notion of political and educational organizations that differ from Plato's. Aristotle's political and educational philosophies are, like Plato's, linked and include a discussion of the importance of public, as opposed to private, education in a polis.

Chapter 2 focuses on the political, epistemological, and educational thought of John Locke, an Enlightenment thinker who rejected the traditional institution of Divine Right and monarchy. Social contract theory emerged during this time period, and Locke's is discussed in detail, which helps students understand Locke's ideas about human nature and the purposes of government. Locke's political theory is explained, as well as his notions of private property, the limited purposes of government, and his preference for private, family schooling over public schooling. Locke's political, epistemological (rationalism and empiricism), and educational theories are woven into the discussion to help students understand how his philosophical notions played a role in his specific plans for representative government and schooling. This chapter concludes with a comparison of Locke's ideas on education with Plato's and John Stuart Mill's as understood by Amy Gutmann, who sketched these distinctions out in her 1999 publication of *Democratic Education*. Finally, Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* of religious differences is briefly described because it illustrates a new openness, albeit limited, to the importance of accepting religious diversity in order to improve security, order, and peace.

Chapter 3 focuses on the political and educational ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Also a social contract theorist who wrote during the Enlightenment, Rousseau offers an anti-Enlightenment backlash in his romantic understanding of Man and nature. Critical of civil society, specifically its socially constructed nature and artificiality, Rousseau develops a political organization that he believes is best under the circumstances of civil society. Perhaps the best depiction of his adoration toward nature is connected to his educational philosophy, which places the child, to the extent possible, in a state of natural freedom to facilitate exploration and curiosity of the child as naturally intended. Rousseau's extensive educational philosophy is described in his tome *Émile*, wherein he provides great detail for his educational ideas. Included in this discussion are Rousseau's separate forms of education for males and females, specifically the education of Sophie, which is compared to the education of Émile. Criticisms of Rousseau's educational philosophy are included, as well as a comparison of Locke's and Rousseau's educational and epistemological ideas. This chapter ends with a discussion of Rousseau's influence



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on subsequent educational philosophers including Leo Tolstoy, John Dewey, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Johann Friedrich Herbart, Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel, Maria Montessori, and A. S. Neill.

Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's political and social theories are covered in Chapter 4 with analysis of their ideas including a comparison of their historical materialism and dialecticism with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's idealism, how their dialectical approach is applied to education, species-being, the interaction between the economic base of societies and their superstructures, capitalistic social relations, reification and the importance of de-reification (ideology critique) as a process of learning and education. A brief description of Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony is explained as a neo-Marxist theory, and Marx and Engels's expectations for socialism and communism are provided toward the end of the chapter, as well as a detailed discussion of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, including one of its most recent and influential scholars, Jürgen Habermas, a basic overview of his communicative action theory, and ideology critique as it developed in neo-Marxist thought.

Chapter 5 focuses on America's philosopher of education, John Dewey, whose extensive breadth of ideas and theories are difficult to summarize in a single chapter. Yet, due to his importance in American educational thought and education history, any condensed review of Dewey will be valuable to education students. The chapter begins with an analysis of Dewey's criticism of hyper-individualism as developed by previous philosophers like Locke in favor of his notion of a democratic pragmatism, collective deliberation, the value in intersubjective inquiry and deliberation, which provide the foundation for his ideas on democratic, social and political associations, and scientific inquiry. Democracy as Dewey's theoretical archetype is discussed, giving an overview of why he prioritized democratic political and social relationships including the democratization of education. Dewey wrote extensively on aesthetics and art, and his understanding of art's educational effects is covered. Dewey believed art provides a transformative and emancipatory venue for learning not unlike that which is emphasized in critical theory. In addition, Chapter 5 provides a discussion and analysis of Dewey's views on conservative, progressive, and liberal education, as well as a discussion of his Lab School, teacher and student relationships in the classroom, school curricula, including his focus on social reconstructionism, and the importance he placed on democratic communication in achieving morally legitimate societal change.

Paulo Freire and his emphasis on dialectical education serve as the focus of Chapter 6. This chapter provides a brief overview of Freire's childhood and early learning experiences growing up in Brazil, and his own realization of power relationships in society that are often hidden by ideologies. His dialectical form of education, most notably identified in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, is examined. Intended to be useful in adult education, Freire's educational ideas transcend limitations based on age. One of his criticisms of traditional education, for example, what he refers to as the "banking concept of schooling" that simply deposits information into students' heads, needs to be



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replaced by an education that focuses on ideology critique, specifically through dialogue, problem-posing, critical thinking, and the importance of and connection between a genuine education and love, humanization, and emancipation from oppressive social, political, and economic structures. A brief excerpt from Ira Shor's description of what Freire expected a schoolroom to be like is included, which highlights Freire's pedagogy including the development of critical consciousness, student-centered dialogue, and problematizing. This chapter concludes with a brief overview of the purposes of a Freirean education: humanization and liberalization.

The final chapter in the philosophy section, like the first, focuses on three theorists: Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Addams, and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Starting with Wollstonecraft, the ideas provided in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* are analyzed, specifically her critique of the traditional notions of gender and her criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy for females. An explanation of Wollstonecraft's ideas for schooling are provided including the importance of schools being public institutions, nationally based, and funded by the government. The reception of Wollstonecraft's ideas is also considered.

Jane Addams's tireless work on behalf of the poor and immigrant populations in Chicago, Illinois are described as she tested traditional notions of democracy, much like her contemporary, John Dewey. Like Dewey, she believed democracy to be more than a political structure of organization; that it was a way of life that needed to be enjoyed in a variety of ways by as many people as possible. Addams was opposed to complete assimilation, a primary function of public schooling at the time. She believed that immigrants, for example, had much to offer and to share with natives, and that they too could educate Americans about their native cultures, beliefs, customs, and practices. Addams seemed to believe that we could all educate one another and that education was certainly not a one-way, ethnocentric process of imposition onto the Other, but a mutually enjoyed relationship that all could take part in and learn from. Hull House, the settlement house she is well known for, served as an educational institution too in allowing her ample opportunities to implement her educational ideas with its residents. Like Dewey, Addams criticized the competitive and alienating nature of hyper-individualism that they both believed contributed to the Great Depression. The sole focus on individualism limited opportunities for collective, collaborative, and democratic association.

The final section offers an overview and analysis of W. E. B. Du Bois' social, political, and educational ideas, including his conception of double-consciousness in the African American community as a result of America's long history of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. Educated as a sociologist and a recipient of Harvard University's first PhD conferred to an African American, Du Bois set out to analyze southern society through a critical lens. By utilizing ethnographic techniques, Du Bois wrote extensively on his findings, and he applied what has been referred to elsewhere as ideology critique to better understand the oppressive conditions African Americans lived under in the South and their schooling, and he recommended and advocated a number of reforms and

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forms of resistance in order to improve African American lives. Du Bois quickly understood the many ways in which oppression and discrimination were institutionalized throughout the South and he especially focused on schooling, how it was used to maintain oppression and how it could be used, if reformed, to liberate Blacks. Du Bois' work spanned a number of media including scholarly journals, poems, the popular press, and ethnographic study in the trenches in order to understand the complex ways in which African Americans were continually subjugated well after emancipation.

### Historical Perspectives in This Book

Following the section on philosophy, the rest of the book focuses on the breadth of American history and education, beginning with the Colonial Period and ending with the contemporary privatization movement. Each chapter in this part includes a discussion within the following conceptual framework: (1) a critical analysis of schooling as both a form of control and a form of liberation; (2) schooling as a site of political conflict resulting in a variety of assimilatory goals confirming broader social and legal constructions of groups in American society; and (3) education is viewed both formally and informally. In other words, while formal schooling serves a formative focus in each chapter, broader political, social, cultural, religious, and economic events and controversies are included, which also serve as informal methods of education and learning. To be consistent with one of the goals of educational foundations, formal schooling is situated within the broader socio-political context in order to help students understand important connections between schools and society.

Chapter 8 begins with the arrival of English colonists in what would become Virginia and the subsequent colonization of the New England colony by the Puritans. The purposes of colonizing the northern, middle-Atlantic, and southern colonies are provided. The Virginia Company, for example, as set forth in the First Charter of Virginia, granted in 1606 by the King of England, set forth two very important goals: imperialistic projects, and educating “heathens” and “savages” for the purposes of “civilizing” and “Christianizing” them. These two goals set the stage for centuries of exploitation and oppression. Thereafter, the Puritans colonized the Plymouth Colony with the intent of constructing an ideal “city on a hill” or a model theocracy that would be admired by the Mother country and serve as an exemplar of what a religious government should resemble. While education and schooling developed along the entire stretch of original colonies, their emphasis and kind varied, which is explained in this chapter. For example, the religious fervor of the Puritans pushed them to establish religious schools, which were common to all Puritan children. In the other colonies, schooling remained the exclusive benefit of wealthier families who paid for education along with an occasional charity school.

Other forms of education are discussed in this chapter, including education in the home and the church. While public schooling quickly became common in Puritan