

What is the Reconceptualization?

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I am not going to answer that question. What I intend in this short paper is to ask it seriously which I suspect means asking another although equivalent question. Namely, can we see a collective future for ourselves in this curriculum field, and if so, what sort of future -- what sort of inquiry -- seems possible? I can see the broad outlines of one possible future, and during the course of this paper I will describe these.

First let me backtrack a little. The word "reconceptualization" derives from James Macdonald and his much quoted 1971 piece on research in curriculum.¹ I helped to popularize it by using the idea to sketch a picture of where the field had been, where it is now, and where it might be going.² The point to make is that it is a word I used not so much to assist us -- meaning reconceptualists -- to understand the distinctions and similarities among our work, as much as to inform the mainstream of the field what might be expected from the few of us I saw working earnestly in ways that would indeed reconceptualize the field mainstream curricularists knew. The preface and other introductory comments in CURRICULUM THEORIZING: THE RECONCEPTUALISTS were intended primarily for those who did not understand the relation of, say, Huebner's writing to their own. The point of those introductory pieces was to situate his and others' work in a context intelligible to the mainstream field.³

For those whose work was published in CURRICULUM THEORIZING the term has evidently always been enigmatic and unsatisfactory. I suppose that it is only from considerable conceptual distance, that provided by being a Tylerian or a Johnsonian for instance, that the work designated as the reconceptualization seems a whole.⁴ This "prerequisite" for appreciating the term is illustrated by remarks overheard during the Milwaukee meeting.⁵ One listener thought the word meaningless. His companion replied: "No, it's not meaningless. While I'm unable to state precisely what it means, it does mean something. I attend AERA and ASCD meetings regularly, and I've attended three of these. Compare these meetings with those of AERA and ASCD and immediately it's obvious that there is something, however ill-defined, that is the reconceptualization." Such remarks I have overheard

several times; perhaps you have too. The point is that however vague the term seems to us who attend these meetings, it is not meaningless, it does refer to something. What I am asking is that you and others join me in identifying exactly what this "something" is.

In my view, it is not only a matter of identifying what exists now, but also a task of delineating a collective aspiration. This is a task as complex as it is ambiguous. Initially it means that we attend to the character of what we have to say to each other, to colleagues in public schools, and colleagues in other areas of education. The effort here is not to categorize others' work. It is to indicate the nature of their interrelationships.

I propose that when we meet again next time, to report on the progress of our individual efforts, that we also attempt to situate these efforts, not only historically in the field, but as well in the context of what others are now doing.⁶ A field is not created and sustained by working in isolation, or by referring only to past figures or to work in related disciplines, although each of these is necessary. They are necessary but not sufficient. What is also required is the sketching of what one sees as the relation to his work to work being done contemporaneously in the field. I underline the phrase "sketching . . . the relation."

Typically when one begins to examine the relation of his work to other work done contemporaneously, there can be a tendency toward criticism exclusively. This tendency to criticize only must be resisted, at least initially. First, such a response is often born in careerist ambitions, not in authentic intellectual dispute. Second, there must be a body of work extant in order for the field to proceed further. The work accumulated thus far remains incipient enough that excessive criticism at this fragile stage can stunt more than instruct and inspire.⁷ Even so of course, when genuine dispute exists, it must be acknowledged. But I suggest that the emphasis be, in the next three to five years, on *describing* the relationships among work now being done.

Perhaps we will want to think of future meetings as providing forums for exchange, for -- in Freire's still useful notion -- "dialogical encounter". They could be occasions to focus on the development of our individual theoretic perspectives while contributing to the formulation of a collective one. Perhaps we will want to consider smaller meetings, limiting attendance to the

speakers themselves. Introducing one's work to others who do not know it, explaining it to others who question its most fundamental assumptions are useful, important orders of work. Yet a kind of dissipation occurs when one spends all one's time introducing one's work, in a sense teaching only the introductory course. I am suggesting that a field cannot seriously develop if we are unwilling for part of our time, to take our eyes off empirically-oriented colleagues, and work earnestly and intensively among ourselves, building a systematic understanding of issues which make problematic the American educational enterprise. Work of an equivalent order to "basic research" must be conducted before we achieve understanding which allows us to potently and meaningfully assist others.

Implicit in such work is the charge to construct a collective direction for the work. However vague our sense of direction is now, we must begin with this vagueness and begin to define it, else face the diffusion and stasis of discourse typically heard at the annual meetings of ASCD and AERA. Direction isn't something one can expect to know in advance; it is created in the course of delineation. We are already in theoretic and historical context: we have a tradition. What is appropriate now is increasing acknowledgement of the relation of individual work to the tradition and to the contemporary scene. Thus to answer the question this paper asks, we can begin to continually sketch the relation of our individual efforts to the tradition and to each other. Not by one theoretician but by us all, the question will, over the years, be answered.

We must avoid the temptation to legislate the themes and functions of the field. What can be avoided is the attempt to stipulate, as Johnson and others have done, what the field is and what it is not.⁸ These attempts, as memory will confirm, initiate little dialogue. Of course, definitions of crucial terms must be offered, refined and when necessary, disputed. However, a field becomes defined collectively and historically, not individually and logically. The lack of conceptual coherence in the field at present cannot be remedied by fiat. This problem can be addressed by conscious efforts to make explicit the relation between one's work and others'. Coherence will develop over time, portrayed perhaps by others not yet on the scene.

In this spirit of initiating dialogue I offer the following response to the question "What is the Reconceptualization?"

Reconceptualization

It begins in fundamental critique of field as it is. The order of critique distinguishes it from most reform efforts, efforts which accept the deep structure of educational and social life, and focus upon "improving it". The reconceptualization aspires to critique which insists upon the transformation of extant structures. It shares with critical theory⁹ the view that criticism must not reify that which it identifies and explains. It must function to dissolve frozen structures. Thus implicit in such an analysis of contemporary educational practices is their transformation.

One such analysis has been Apple's, which has demonstrated how the schools and its curriculum function to disallow conflict.¹⁰ Conflict is not only disallowed, it is illegitimated as a model of social interaction. For instance, natural science is ordinarily portrayed as if it has evolved consensually, without rancorous debate, without non-scientific motives and aims. Relatedly, the school's insistence upon discipline, an important element of its "hidden curriculum", indoctrinates our children to political and cultural, as well as intellectual, passivity. Surely the Holocaust reminds us again of the disastrous possibilities of a cultural regime trained to passivity and obedience.

Many have discussed the school's overwhelming preoccupation with control, an obsession not incidental to the school's mission in a society economically and politically structured as is our own. While using terms like "learning" and "education" so constantly and ritualistically as to ensure their meaninglessness, the schools delude themselves and others as to their actual function: training. With increasing emphasis upon "career education" and "vocational training" the delusion is increasingly difficult to maintain. Schools are centers where the young are trained to perform competently the tasks their elders present to them as socially necessary and beneficent. Such an analysis of school curriculum has been conducted exhaustively by Apple and others.¹¹

Kliebard's work also serves to illustrate the order of critique crucial to genuine reconceptualizations of the field.¹² He has shown how the curriculum field, from its inception, has been subsumed in the ethos of "scientism", a cult of efficiency and production especially fashionable among businessmen. This unreflective emphasis upon efficiency, production, improvement ("ameliorative orientation" is Kliebard's term), upon behavioral notions of psycho-social and intellectual development, molded the nation's schools

into, structurally speaking, mirrors of its factories. The ideal of education evaporates; a residue of schooling, training for profitable existence in a capitalist economic order, remains.

Teaching is reduced to instruction. As Huebner has indicated, the technical mode, a mode obsessed with control and prediction, displaces ethical and aesthetic modes of teaching and conceiving curriculum.¹³ As Habermas has demonstrated, the pragmatic, a classical concern with just action in particular situations, has been replaced with the technical, even if the terms "pragmatic" and "practical" persist.¹⁴ Examined closely, it is clear that most calls for practical assistance from our colleagues in the public schools are in fact calls for technique, leaving unexamined the deeper structural bases of most so-called "learning problems". In my early piece "Sanity, Madness, and the School" I describe the process of self-estrangement and madness typical school life provokes.¹⁵ It is this scope of critique which distinguishes the reconceptualization from any recent phenomenon in American education, with the significant exception of revisionism in the history of education field.¹⁶

There is a further distinguishing characteristic. This comprehensive critique has its origins in traditions that are European, not American. They are disparate traditions -- Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology, psychoanalysis -- whose common bond in the context of the curriculum field is their dissimilarity to the behaviorism and empiricism characteristic of American social science and educational research. Thus it is from the perspective of mainstream curricularists and educational researchers that these traditions appear related. For those whose work constitutes the reconceptualization their relationships are unclear.

What is crucial for reconceptualists, I believe, is to remember that these traditions are sources for the reconceptualization. We must use their insights to create our own. We are Americans not Europeans; we are educationists not philosophers or psychoanalysts. We must avoid the temptation to uproot insights from these traditions and "apply" them to the educational issues of our time. Such work is by definition derivative and distorting, involving as it does reduction of complex issues to conceptual systems created in other times, on other soil, for other purposes. To become scholars of phenomenology or of Marxist theory first and curricularists second is to betray our historical calling. These origins are important; I do not demean them. But they are origins only, and we must create

our own intellectual and practical discipline, independent of its sources, sensitive and responsible to our present.

An anecdote may help illustrate this point. During the 1977 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society in Nashville, a philosopher of education read a paper explaining the significance of a certain phenomenological concept for educational theory. During the questioning period following his presentation, another philosopher of education, a European who had studied with students of Merleau-Ponty in Paris, made the following comment. I reconstruct it as follows. "You have written a thorough, in fact scholarly impeccable paper on this topic. It is clear you understand this phenomenological notion in a sophisticated way. Yet you have missed its most important point, in fact what some would say is the point of phenomenology. Of course there are those scholars whose work is to explicate this idea of Merleau-Ponty's and that one of Husserl's. But to take such an idea and plant it in the foreign soil that is American educational philosophy is, in an important way, to betray the fundamental charge of phenomenology. For instance, we are admonished to follow Husserl's famous little phrase, to "return to the things themselves". Don't you see that this means that we must abandon, insofar as this is possible, extant conceptual systems -- not just behaviorism but phenomenology also - through use of the eidetic reduction. We must work to make direct contact with preconceptual experience, and then articulate, not in Schutz's or in Merleau-Ponty's words, but your own, what this is you are now in contact with, what you experience directly, unmediated by conceptual blinders. You have written a careful paper on phenomenology but you have missed its point."

In his reply the speaker made it clear he continued to miss this point. He failed to see that the conceptual structure of his paper was pre-eminently logical, a linear, almost algebraic logic. If "A" (the phenomenological concept), then "B" (the logically-derived educational implication). This work is then, at base, a conceptual exercise, and bears no necessary, certainly no explicit relation to the speaker's life world. The work of phenomenologists may contribute to the formulation of his perspective, but if he is absolutely faithful to this tradition, it must finally be *his* perspective, grounded in his preconceptual experience, that he must at once uncover and create, subjecting it, in later stages, to collective critical examination.

This loss of self to theory certainly occurs among some Marxists also. Rigid, automatic translation of educational issues into the language of class struggle and economic superstructure guarantees only linguistic facility. One must make use of both extant theory and preconceptual experience in the reconstruction of individual and social experience which is theoretical description and explanation. *This dialectical relation between conception and perception is the structural essence of educational experience.* Mere acquisition of others' languages is only training not education. It maintains a politically subordinate relationship between self and theory which both reflects and recreates the servitude of the masses to those who claim and are given authority.¹⁷

Recognizing one's complicity in the maintenance of oppressive social structures is work contiguous with discovering one's own voice, one's own language and views of others, and discovering, in phenomenological terms, the "things themselves". Such work can be as frightening as it is difficult. Yet the alternative seems to be loss of self to theory, as illustrated by the philosopher in Nashville. By performing only a logical transcription of phenomenological or Marxian concept to educational situation, one remains ensconced in words, on the surface of things. The essential relation to reality is an estranged one.

Thus, while the traditions from which we come are immensely powerful in their shaping of our work, we must not be seduced by them, and become scholars of phenomenology, or of Marxism, or of psychoanalysis. We must take seriously our responsibility to face the educational issues of our time, both in their surface forms as well as in their deeper theoretical significance, a significance we must identify. This means being willing to speak in our own voices, with words while clearly related to established theoretical traditions, strictly speaking belong to no one discipline. Almost as a kind of by-product we must be willing to attempt what our predecessors and contemporaries may have wished but never achieved. We must make curriculum studies -- and curriculum in our sense is sufficiently multi-dimensional in its meaning that it is roughly synonymous with education -- into an autonomous discipline, with its own distinctive research methods and theoretical emphases. Of course these methods and emphases will bear significant relation to the traditions from which they originated. However, they will not be identical or reducible to them.¹⁸

Here it is appropriate to note a confusion illustrated by the frequent use

of the term "reconceptualism" rather than "reconceptualization." I suppose I contributed to this misunderstanding by subtling the 1975 book of readings CURRICULUM THEORIZING: THE RECONCEPTUALISTS. Both terms -- reconceptualists and reconceptualism -- indicate something finished, something final, when what is actually the case is a phenomenon just under way, with divergent perspectives, with internal controversy over several issues, which appears as an aggregate during these early stages primarily when contrasted with the rest of the field. The term "reconceptualization" -- not reconceptualism -- accurately describes what is occurring to the curriculum field in the nineteen seventies. The field is being transformed from an essentially non-theoretical, pseudo-pragmatic (i.e., narrowly technical) area into a theoretically potent, conceptually autonomous field which inquires systematically into the multi-dimensional reality that is education and schooling, and most importantly, in ways that aspire to transform both. Instead of being handmaiden to the extant technocratic order, we aspire to transform that order as we work to transform ourselves and our work, from the static, the oppressive, the deformed, to the fluid, freeing process that is historical and individual movement.¹⁹

The issues examined will of course change. Stasis -- in this context indicated by an obsessive preoccupation with one issue -- must be dissolved. "Reconceptualism" suggests such a stasis as it connotes a doctrine, a kind of party platform, endorsing, say, children's rights. Children's rights may well be examined and advocated as an historically appropriate issue, but our focus on an issue must avoid obsessiveness. Any such issue is both cause and effect of basic human themes, for instance oppressive, and this essential ecological fabric must never be obscured. Given other times and circumstances, other issues will be addressed, always acknowledging their interrelationships, thus creating a comprehensive educational theory which by its very nature alters that which it seeks to understand.²⁰

What must constantly be attended to in a curriculum field that is reconceptualized from the technical, pseudo-practical tradition that is its past, reconceptualized from the narrowly social scientific present that myopically continues its tradition, to the emancipatory discipline it must become, is the historical-biographical function of any given issue. For instance, does the "back to basics" movement function to oppress even more those already oppressed in the name of public education? Are there jobs for those who often must sacrifice their ethnic inheritance to acquire the lan-

guage and skills of the white middle class? Does the "back to basics" movement function to enlarge the perspectives of the participants, allowing them to comprehend more completely and subtly the dynamics of social and psychological life in his bureaucratized society? The point is that any given issue must be examined according to its emancipatory-oppressive potential, as these illustrative questions permit.

While raising such questions for colleagues and for the public we must attend as well to the historical-biographic functions of this questioning for ourselves. We must be willing to expose our own activity to the same critical examination to which we subject others', else risk mirroring the structure of social relations we criticize in schools and society generally.²¹ We are, of course, embedded in social context as well; only through our participation in social schemata -- for instance forms of oppression -- are we able to recognize them. The danger always for the theoretician and critic is deluding himself that identification of evils in others guarantees his freedom from them. Naming and critical comprehensive do not always an exorcism make.

Particularly seductive, it seems to me, is examination of an issue which at first initiates transformation of the issue. However, the critic often remains with an issue after its emancipatory function has past. As Berlin notes in this regard: "The history of thought and culture is, as Hegel showed with great brilliance, a changing pattern of great liberating ideas which inevitably turn into suffocating straightjackets, and so stimulate their own destruction by new emancipating, and at the same time, enslaving conceptions."²² The point here is that one must attend to the temporal life as well as biographic function of a given issue.

For instance, it is possible that the notion of "social control" will lose its usefulness and energy. At some point readers become numbed to descriptions and explanations of the myriad of ways schools control its inhabitants. With assistance from others we must determine when certain emphases have outlived their emancipatory lives, and have become incantation. It is also possible that the notion of "emancipation" itself will reach a similar kind of cul-de-sac. We must not hesitate to drop it at that point, and speak of that which moves us and others on. As Kierkegaard understood, it is in the relation between the knower and the known where truth resides. The "truth" of course is not a static set of beliefs, no catechism, but a vital, self-transformative state of being, in which the relation between self and belief, self and artifact, self and other is dialectical. Such a relation assures

synthesis. Arrest, in dialectical terms, means a static tension between thesis and antithesis such that no synthetical resolution is possible. We must work to ensure, as much as this is humanly possible, that our relationships to the Other -- whether this "Other" be belief, colleague, institution -- be such that we both are synthesized into more historically progressive forms.

It is precisely at this point many social movements fail. Ideas become prized for their professional and political status, a necessarily static and dehumanizing order of valuing. Ideas become reified, pursued regardless of their psychologically and politically regressive consequences. If the avant-garde, regardless of discipline, falls prey to the delusion that it alone understands the character of the synthesis to come, of which it is necessarily only an antecedent element. It attempts to stipulate the character of what in principle cannot be known. In such instances an avant-garde becomes fascistic, dictating what change must come, when. Its doctrine, however humanistic its platform might sound, functions primarily to aggrandize its own professional and political position, and diminish that of others.

Those reconceptualists who have refused to acknowledge the reality and promise of the reconceptualization have done so, in part, in protest of the process of being defined by another. Such protest is healthy, but its time is now past. The reconceptualization, I am suggesting, is fundamentally a dialectical relation among knowers, knowing, and the known. Its thematic character must and will be identified and constructed through the discourse and scholarship of its participants. To imagine it a finished product, a doctrine, is to miss its point. What is essential about the reconceptualization -- as the literal definition of the word denotes -- is its constant redefinition. Thus the question that serves as a title to this paper is a question that serves to invite your participation in its answering. For it is ourselves who shape our relations among each other, to colleagues in other disciplines, to the American public. The order of contribution to that public and its educational system is contingent in inescapable ways upon the quality of our own self-constitution. We cannot expect to meaningfully participate in the transformation of the nation and its educational institutions if we fail to authentically participate in the constitution and transformation of ourselves and our work.

REFERENCES

1. James B. Macdonald, "Curriculum Theory." In W.F. Pinar (ed.), CURRICULUM THEORIZING: THE RECONCEPTUALISTS. Berkeley: McCutchan, 1975, pp. 5-13.
2. See the preface, CURRICULUM THEORIZING: THE RECONCEPTUALISTS, Also "The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies", JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM STUDIES, in press, and "Notes on the Curriculum Field: 1978", EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER, in press (Sept. 1978).
3. W.F. Pinar (ed.), CURRICULUM THEORIZING: THE RECONCEPTUALISTS. Berkeley: McCutchan, 1975.
4. Ralph W. Tyler, BASIC PRINCIPLES OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971. Mauritz M. Johnson, "Definitions and Models of Curriculum Theory". EDUCATIONAL THEORY 17, no. 2 (1967), 127-39.
5. Curriculum Theory Conference held on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, November, 1976, chairmen: Alex Molnar and John Zahorik. Proceedings: CURRICULUM THEORY. Washington, D.C.: A.S.C.D., 1978.
6. At this point it is planned that THE JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM THEORIZING will sponsor these meetings and publish the proceedings. Those interested in submitting a paper proposal contact a member of the editorial board of the journal.
7. Books include HEIGHTENED CONSCIOUSNESS, CULTURAL REVOLUTION, AND CURRICULUM THEORY (McCutchan, 1974), CURRICULUM THEORIZING: THE RECONCEPTUALISTS (1975), SCHOOLS IN SEARCH OF MEANING (A.S.C.D., 1975), TOWARD A POOR CURRICULUM (Kendall/Hunt, 1976), CURRICULUM THEORY (A.S.C.D., 1978). At a 1976 conference held at the State University of New York College at Geneseo, Professors Apple, Greene, Kliebard, and Huebner spoke. Each of these names has been associated with the reconceptualization. Proceedings were published in CURRICULUM INQUIRY. Those who chaired this meeting -- Professors P. DeMarte and J. Rosario, did not see the meeting in the tradition of the others.
8. Professor Johnson has hardly been alone in such attempts.
9. For an introductory discussion of critical theory, see R.J. Bernstein, THE RESTRUCTURING OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY. Philadel-

phia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978. Originally published in hard-cover by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich in 1976.

10. Michael W. Apple, "The Hidden Curriculum and the Nature of Conflict", Pinar (ed.), CURRICULUM THEORIZING, pp. 95-119.

11. See, for instance, Joel Spring, THE SORTING MACHINE, New York: David McKay, Inc., 1976; Michael Young and Geoff Whitty, SOCIETY, STATE, AND SCHOOLING. Ringmer: The Falmer Press, 1977.

12. See his "Persistent Curriculum Issues in Historical Perspectives" and "Bureaucracy and Curriculum Theory" in Pinar (ed.), CURRICULUM THEORIZING.

13. Dwayne E. Huebner, "Curriculum Language and Classroom Meanings", IBID., pp. 217-236.

14. Jurgen Habermas. KNOWLEDGE AND HUMAN INTERESTS. Trans. J.J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

15. In Pinar, CURRICULUM THEORIZING, pp. 359-383.

16. See, for instance the work of Karler, Katz, Spring.

17. See Paulo Freire, PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED. New York: Herder and Herder, 1971 for a discussion of the nature of oppression.

18. We can expect skepticism and hostility from colleagues who do not believe such a field can develop.

19. Of course the two extremes ordinarily intermingle. Nonetheless it is appropriate to state the aspiration in its extreme form.

20. This is an "ecological" view, in that if "A" is altered, the entire system is affected, including specific element "B".

21. See Alvin W. Gouldner, THE COMING CRISIS OF WESTERN SOCIOLOGY. New York: Basic Books, 1970, for a discussion of this matter, which he conceives of as a sociology of sociology.

22. Isaiah Berlin, "Does Political Theory Still Exist?" PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND SOCIETY (Second Series), Ed. Peter Laslett and W.G. Runciman, p. 19.