There is a great deal of controversy about the continued impact that the social reconstructive philosophy has on our current educational system. Some feel that there is very little evidence remaining of the social reconstruction curriculum while others see aspects of Social Reconstructionism alive and very influential in the American education system today (Weltman, 2002 & Zuga, 1992). “The philosophy of reconstructionism contains two major premises: (1) society is in need of constant reconstruction or change, and (2) such social change involves both reconstruction of education and the use of education in reconstructing society.” (Ozmon & Craver, 1999, p.171).

The social reconstructionists’ movement began in the United States in the 1920s and was most influential in the 1930s. Reconstructionism was seen as a radical movement that focused on the need for social change. Reconstructionists believed that educational institutions should be used as the vehicle to bring about the changes needed in social justice and to extend democracy to the world (Stanley, 1992). Although Social Reconstructionism is often seen as an outgrowth of 20th century Pragmatism, reconstructionists ideas have been evident throughout history (Ozmon & Craver, 1999).

Many philosophers with a vision of creating a better world by advocating social change have held reconstructivist’s
beliefs. Plato, when writing the Republic, suggested radical changes in Greek society. The Stoic philosophers were concerned with creating a world state and many early Christian philosophers taught reconstructionist’s beliefs in order to promote an idyllic Christian state. Karl Marx, who envisioned a new world order based on communism, saw the current education system as an instrument used to promote the problematic status quo. John Dewey saw education as a means to transform both individuals and society. Marx along with many other philosophers felt education could be effective in transforming society (Ozmon & Craver, 1999).

Social Reconstructionism is a philosophy that emphasizes the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and a worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education. Theodore Brameld is viewed as the father of social reconstructionism. He recognized the potential for either human annihilation through technology and human cruelty or the capacity to create a better society using technology and human compassion (Brameld, 1956). Brameld viewed reconstructionism as an unfinished philosophy that was still in its developing stages. Brameld was futuristic and optimistic in his thinking. He believed that the future could be better if people worked to make it better (Stanley, 1992).
Reconstructionist education challenges students, teachers, and the entire community to learn about existing world problems, to develop viable solutions and strive to achieve those solutions. Brameld developed the *Wheel Curriculum* to aid secondary reconstructivist educators in implementing this approach (Brameld, 1956).

Where Brameld took on the role of the philosopher, George Counts was the educational activist-scholar who was more concerned with social activism. He realized that education was the means of preparing people for creating this new social order. In his book, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order?*, Counts challenged educators to use their strategic positions and influence to promote positive social and cultural changes (Ozmon & Craver, 1999). Counts argued that the popular philosophy of Progressivism was too focused on the successes of the individual and nationalistic goals. Counts was aware that the major problems of his day were not isolated to individual countries but affected the entire globe (Stanley, 1992). Although Counts urged educators to join forces to help solve social problems, he realized that schools were only one of the many institutions that needed to be reorganized in order to create an improved society (Ozmon & Craver, 1999).

Ivan Illich took Counts’ ideas on reforming the goals of public institutions to the extreme. Illich, a priest turned
social reformer, rose to fame in the 1970s. He wrote a series of controversial books that challenged the effectiveness of public agencies such as schools and health care (Ozmon & Craver, 1999). In Deschooling Society, Illich suggested that school and education were two different entities and that most education occurred over a lifetime outside of the walls of buildings set aside for learning. He denounced institutionalized education and the institution of the school as producers of merchandise with a specific exchange value in a society where those who already possess a certain cultural capital derive the most benefit (Illich, 1971). Illich’s popularity was short lived. He was accused of being a Utopian thinker and is further criticized for his early withdrawal from the wider educational debate. A deeper involvement and the development of practical strategies for putting his ideas into practice might have changed the way that he is remembered (Gajardo’, 1993).

Although not to the same extreme, many other social reconstructionists held a similar view as Illich on social institutions. Reconstructionists frequently used the term ‘crisis’ to describe what they perceived to be the condition of our society and culture. They felt that our institutions, especially schools, lagged behind the reality of social change (Stanley, 1992). Reconstructionism has influenced educators in thinking differently about the role of education. Ozmon and
Craver (1999) stated, “Since the world of tomorrow will be run by the children of today, it is vital that we encourage young people to be concerned about the future and instill in them the idea that they can help shape that future according to their own goals and aspirations.” (p. 183).

Reconstructionists educators see the world in a great crisis for survival and see that schools will play an important role in the outcome of this struggle. According to reconstructionists, educators must become social activists and become involved in activities outside of their own classrooms and communities. Many people are uncomfortable with the thought of educators taking on this dual role of educator and social activist. Reconstructionists say that there is no need to separate knowledge and action. Ozman and Craver (1999) said it this way, “Knowledge should lead to action, and action should clarify, modify, and increase knowledge.” (p.186). Teaching includes actions which are intended to make individuals critically examine, and in many cases, change and be sensitive to their and to others attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviors, thinking, and knowledge. The educator’s role is to prepare students to take charge of their lives, work collectively, with others, and to speak out to bring about social change (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999). In order to be effective, educators must be aware of and willing to initiate actions required to bring about
the changes needed in our society. If administrators and teachers do not take a stand on the issues, students will not be able to take a stand (Zuga, 1992).

Reconstructionists not only encourage changes in the role of the educator, they also see the need to modify the curriculum. Reconstructionists favor a “world” curriculum with an emphasis on truth, brotherhood, and justice. They feel that students learn best by participating in their communities and that a large part of their educational day should be spent outside of the classroom. They also feel that students should focus on current world issues and that the curriculum should be action oriented (Ozmon & Craver, 1999).

Theodore Brameld designed “the wheel” curriculum for secondary education. Brameld’s detailed curriculum focuses on problem solving and links previous knowledge with the problem being addressed during the current year of study (Brameld, 1956 & Ozmon & Craver, 1999).

Reconstructionists see cultural education as an important way of understanding and seeing the needs of different countries around the world. They think that students should learn foreign languages and be made aware of issues on a worldwide basis. Reconstructionists feel that students should be taught to look into and make predictions about the future. If they want
society to be better in the future students must be taught how to work to make it better (Ozmon & Craver, 1999).

There are innumerable problems facing people across the globe today. The task of solving these problems will inevitably fall to the children in our schools today. Reconstructivist educators feel these children should start participating in projects addressing problems of living, so they become aware of these problems and attempt to understand them. It is only through this process that students will develop the skills needed to solve these and new problems that face our society in the future (Hadzigeorgiou, 2001).

Social Reconstructionism in its original design may not be apparent in the educational arena today; however, many aspects of today’s educational facilities contain remnants of the social reconstructivists’ ideas. For example, these ideas can be seen in our global social studies curriculum, the problem solving approach to educating children, child-centered teaching methods, and service learning opportunities (Bondy & McKenzie, 1999 & Weltman, 2002).

Social reconstructivists see schools as the institution with the greatest potential to stimulate change in society. Although this may be true, society tends to blame public schools and educators for the majority of our societal ills. Some suggest that our society has developed a “no-fault” philosophy
where the responsibilities for lack of success are often blamed on someone else. When children fail in school, teachers are to blame. When they commit violent acts, the media is to blame. It is time for the entire community to become active and to take on their share of the responsibility in helping to prepare children for their upcoming roles in society.

The school curriculum today is so complicated and full that it is almost impossible to teach everything that is required. Children are pulled out of math and reading classes for support services like counseling or speech. Schools have evolved into surrogate parents for many students. Schools have a duty to help train children for the future; however, the educational system can no longer be expected to meet every need that a child may have. It is time for parents to realize that they are ultimately responsible for their children. It is their duty to teach basic morals that include respect for themselves and others. It is their duty to meet the financial and health care needs of their children. Social reconstructionists feel that schools can be used as a vehicle to change social problems; however, parents need to parent and schools need to get back to their original role of educating.
References


