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Schooling in the ‘Iron Cage’ and the Crucial Role of Interpretive, Normative, and Critical Perspectives in Social Foundations Studies

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This article addresses the unique role performed by social foundations programs in colleges of education and in addressing broader issues facing education today, which fundamentally include the development of interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives in academia. All three perspectives serve to create a scholarly framework within which students and academicians interpret and normatively reflect upon existing educational, political, historical, religious, economic, and social institutions critically. In other words, although many departments in colleges of education tend to fulfill the functional, professional, and institutional requirements essential in preparing future teachers to enter public and private schools, social foundations programs utilize interdisciplinary expertise, primarily from the social sciences and humanities, to explicate extrainstitutional critiques, interpretations, and normative analyses of existing social structures, including schools. Although social foundations programs perform a variety of academic functions, it is this unique reflexive and normatively critical capacity—what critical theorists refer to as ideology critique—that augments social foundations programs and informs present and future scholars in the field.

Students should be critical examiners of their experiences, questioning and interpreting their lives and education rather than merely walking through them. (Shor 2006, 30)

Marx defined ideology as “any doctrine or belief that supports or justifies the economic and political domination of one class over another,” specifically

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referred to in his *The German Ideology*, as “false consciousness,” according to David Ingram (1990, 38). Building on Marx’s terms, Ingram asserts that the goal of modern ideology critique is to “preserve the truth of cultural ideas, while exposing their ideological veneer,” which “require[s] mediating cultural understanding with historical explanation” (Ingram 1990, 39). In the following pages, I outline the ideological and structural purposes of public or government schooling extant in any society in order to assist the reader in developing an appreciation for the unique role—ideology critique—performed by social foundations programs.

THE IDEOLOGICAL AND STRUCTURAL RATIONALES OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLING: SITUATING THE PURPOSES OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

Philosopher Johann Fichte responded to Prussia’s defeat by Napoleon in 1806 by criticizing that country’s educational system. Having failed to develop a deeply-rooted nationalism and collective character among its youth, he argued, Prussia became a comparatively feeble nation-state vulnerable to external aggression. As a government institution, Fichte placed tremendous responsibility on schools for socializing the young and promoting German chauvinism. This required a continuation of its centralized educational system, but he stressed that it be designed to “fashion [the individual] such that he cannot will anything save what you want him to will” (Fichte 2008, 23–24). Totalitarian in outlook, Fichte saw schooling as essential in fulfilling the conventional, functional, and ideological needs of the German state by strategically uniting children’s self-identity with the interests of the nation. In the early nineteenth century, this unification was to be achieved by instilling in children the ethnocentric virtues of Germany’s history, language, and traditional culture. Socializing youth in such a way, and by cultivating patriotic sensibilities among them, Fichte assumed that Germany could more effectively defend itself against hostile powers by deeply embedding and preserving dominant cultural authority through schooling.

Fichte’s understanding of state schooling is not exceptional. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that the central purposes of public schooling in any nation are intended to fulfill the utilitarian needs and the ideological interests of the state, however contested these may be among competing interests. Schooling, therefore, is a form of power institutionalized by the state’s political apparatus for the essential purpose of ideological maintenance. Schooling may be much more than this, but whatever other purposes exist, upholding dominant ideologies remains one of its fundamental tasks.

In the United States, for example, early leaders such as Noah Webster and Horace Mann advocated common schooling to unify the nation and to develop a distinct yet uniform American culture reflective of a dominant ideology. Despite
the ebb and flow of multiple educational proposals swirling about since the Revolution, common schooling became institutionalized during the mid-nineteenth century, undertaking many of the responsibilities that had earlier been performed by the family and the church. The augment of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and the growing diversity that all these forces engendered resulted in schools serving as the ideological nucleus responsible for Americanizing youth. Nationalism was expected to supplant, if not subvert, provincial insularities present in ethnic and religious enclaves. Whether to culturally homogenize a diverse population or meeting the needs of the economy, schools and school policies represent an important institutional means of preserving (or attempting to preserve) ascendant economic, political, religious, and social power or ideological constancy.

Although America’s history, language, religious influence, and culture remain politically contested, the educational purpose of ideology maintenance endures. For instance, contemporary educational frames of reference have shifted by giving priority to a hybrid ideology characterized by neoliberalism and neoconservatism, expressed in terms like human capital, multinational educational corporations, privatization, commodification of education, choice, outsourcing, scientific management, and deregulation. Neoconservatism, with its demonstrated appeal to a so-called traditional morality in America, supports federal policies that subsidize religious schools, and in particular Christian institutions (Bartlett et al. 2002). Critical of the introduction of multicultural ideas in our schools since the 1960s, angry about the constitutional endorsement of the separation of church and state as a result of court decisions like Engel v. Vitale (1962), and the growth of federal power since the War on Poverty, neoliberals and neoconservatives joined forces during the 1980s, bolstering a political agenda intended to dismantle America’s public schools in the name of global competitiveness and religious moral authority. The 1960s experienced rapid social changes, which were viewed by these two groups as evidence of cultural decadence, and their opposition to a mutable America was and continues to be fierce. Because America’s public schools are responsible for ideological maintenance, it is inevitable that they endure the manifestation of political conflict culminating over their purposes and how they are governed.¹

Comparatively speaking, our relentless concentration on global competitiveness today illustrates parallels with Fichte’s anxiety over Prussia’s preparedness for war. The difference between America and Fichte’s Prussia is that our contemporay national apprehensions are cloaked in the rhetoric of comparative economic advantage, an economic nationalism intended to guard against aggressively competitive nations, often resulting in our placating multinational corporations and the power they exercise at the national, state, and local levels. Whatever favorable or noxious affects these ideological agendas produce in our schools, it should be clear that the purposes of public schooling are contingent upon and shaped by powerful interest groups determined to pursue their ideological agendas that are frequently articulated in education policies.
My purpose in expounding on the information in the previous section is to identify the inherent dichotomies that exist in assumptions about the purposes for which public schools were shaped and how these purposes often impede or inhibit opportunities for democratic education. As government institutions, the formal ideological goals of schooling often transcend and destabilize attempts to empower or emancipate students as advocates of democratic education intend. Rather, schooling is expected to serve, first and foremost, the interests of the state, and the state is far from being democratic. Moreover, the institutionalization of any human activity tends to evolve in ways that objectify the individuals who are served by an institution. In other words, rather than the institution responding in ways that effectively cultivate the diverse and unique characteristics, interests, learning abilities, aspirations, and emancipatory interests of its human clientele, the latter are increasingly expected to fulfill the technical and administrative requirements of the institution, which are manifested in acute concerns over organization, efficiency, and the standardization of operating procedures and patterns of behavior.

The institution’s outcomes are determined principally by its ability to adhere to systematic goals over and above its ability to address or respond to the unique and diverse personalities of its human clientele. Realization of this fact helps us understand the difficult challenges facing social foundations programs and the significant purposes they serve by critiquing and normatively analyzing dominant ideologies and their efforts to develop schools that democratically empower students. Those of us who operate in social foundations programs recognize this fundamental paradox—the challenge of empowering public school students democratically when neither the dominant ideology nor the institutions that administer and sustain this ideology are democratic. In short, this is the inherent schism embodied in the differences between schooling and education.

Students are often expected to be passive recipients of information and reactive consumers of material culture who may choose only from a predefined set of alternatives that have been designed to accomplish institutional efficiency and organizational expediency. The problem of institutionalizing education, analogous to the bureaucratization of virtually any human activity, is that it tends to emphasize the administrative and structural demands and processes while diminishing individual creativity and democratic empowerment, particularly because the latter are viewed as potentially disruptive to the former’s productive efficiency. The problem is essentially a question of what kind of education is lost or repressed by the institutionalization of schooling.

Because social foundations scholars often speak to the importance of democratic education (myself included), we might ask ourselves how we can increase...
a democratic form of education within undemocratic systems? In other words, we often conflate education with schooling, and it is the latter’s institutionalization that prevents it from becoming democratized. It is because the purposes of schooling are fundamentally rooted in ideology maintenance, eclipsed by a focus on economic competitiveness and privatization today that democratic education fails to proliferate.

The increasing top-down approach to schooling, the standardization of curricula and assessments, and the growing hyperprivatization discourse that is its core, have prescribed a distinctive character, structure, and mode of governing schools that serve neoliberal and neoconservative ideologies and their ensuing tributaries of political and social inequality. To parallel Sheldon S. Wolin’s (1994) discussion of political theory and apply it to education, we have done to education what philosophers of education have been doing since Plato, namely, to keep education from becoming too democratic. To make another corresponding statement with Hannah Arendt’s (1990) idea that the ratification of the US Constitution definitively circumscribed democratic citizenship in favor of a nominal form of citizenship, schooling prepares students to be citizens in their private roles, but it fails to cultivate their appetite for shared democratic action. Democratic education is viewed as marginally important, nebulous, and certainly incongruous when compared to the goals of preparing students for the workplace and the global economy.

THE VOCATION OF THE METHODIST IN ACADEMIA AND THE VITAL ROLE OF NORMATIVE AND CRITICAL ANALYSES

Once education became institutionalized, it increasingly established bureaucratic routines and institutional mandates developed by centralized authorities, creating standardized curricula and assessments, often ignoring the educational uniqueness of human beings to meet the utilitarian and functional demands of the state and eventually federal policy makers. Schooling quickly became authoritatively responsible for reifying and legitimizing ascendant ideology, including a façade of American myths, distorted and biased history, and serving the interests of powerful groups. Schools became responsible for and continually participate in institutionally reproducing the dominant culture. Institutionalized schooling is responsible for filtering and prepackaging official information from the top-down to expedite its acquisition among large populations of students.

Based on external policy demands, including pressures from accreditation agencies, colleges of education often must conform to standardizing the professional preparation of teachers. This results in accentuating the technical and administrative training of teachers while disregarding or being indifferent to ideology critique. Teachers’ professional practices embody and therefore align with the
external ideological expectations that govern their training. As is the case in other professional preparation programs, whether it be the law, economics, or accounting, teacher education programs prepare future professionals by accentuating the orthodox skills and established methods—the already established professional parameters—that buttress or reinforce the ideological expectations of their vocation. There is less emphasis given to normative and critical analyses underlying the ideological structure and purposes of their vocations.

In colleges of education, social foundations programs provide this unique role for students to supplement their professional training with greater academic and scholarly depth. According to the Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education (American Educational Studies Association 2012), for example, social foundations programs “assist students in examining and explaining education in light of value orientations,” and they “promote understanding of normative and ethical behavior in educational development and recognition of the inevitable presence of normative influences in educational thought and practice.” Scholars and students in social foundations studies construct normative judgments about education, schooling, policy, and policy making through “critical study and ... reflection” (American Educational Studies Association 2012, 4). Social foundations programs provide colleges of education with the same framework that Wolin’s political theory provides departments of political science. As Kaufman-Osborne (2010) aptly concludes,

to locate the borders of political theory here but not there, to differentiate it from this project but not that, to tell its history in this manner as opposed to some other ... is neither innocuous nor innocent. It is not innocent because the way these projects are conducted is bound up with reproduction of very real configurations of power, many of which extend far beyond the discipline of political science as well as the academy; and it is not innocuous because the way these tasks are completed, whose meaning is never altogether under the control of its authors, cannot help but react back upon the imagined community of political theorists and, in so doing, shape its members’ conception of the enterprise to which they are committed (656).

Schooling serves as an attempt to develop individuals, but ideology critique, for example, pushes us to analyze specific questions related to this development, such as, development for what purposes and development in what ways, as well as the kind of development that is ignored or eschewed. As Amy Gutmann asserts, “Education may aim to prefect human nature by developing its potentialities, to deflect it into serving socially useful purposes, or to defeat it by repressing those inclinations that are socially destructive” (1999, 22, emphasis in original). It is worth considering the purposes of schooling and to always critique and normatively evaluate the extent to which institutionalized schooling develops or fails to develop children’s potentialities. In other words, we must always attempt to
remain aware of the extent to which institutionalized schooling serves the various purposes delineated by Gutmann.

Scholars in social foundations who are interested in democratizing education are focused on developing students’ potentialities, and we are cognizant of the fact that institutionalized schooling, regardless of good intentions, tends to be driven by institutional demands over and above actualizing the unique and diverse potentialities, creativity, and imagination in students. Again, institutions, including schools, evolve in ways that place primacy on institutional and organizational demands, which may or may not coincide with our ideals of what schooling and education should be. When thinking about this issue, I’m often reminded of Mark Twain’s adage, “I have never let my schooling interfere with my education,” which suggests that the two serve distinct and separate ends. Those of us who support democratic forms of education invite the merging of schooling and education, but our difficulty in realizing this amalgamation continues to serve as one of our fundamental juxtapositions in social foundations programs today.

This brings me to my principal issue related to the unique purposes of social foundations programs in the United States. Methodologies used in colleges of education (as well as those used in other academic disciplines) overwhelmingly focus on preparing future teachers in specifically defined ways to comply with or satisfy the functional demands placed on public schools by external political forces. Therefore, it is not surprising that much of the professional and scholarly activity in colleges of education emphasize the methodological procedures and research skills that were initiated during the behavioral revolution. Similar to other academic departments in universities, particularly in the social sciences, this has resulted in our privileging method above normative critical analysis, and as Kaufman-Osborne (2010) asserts above, without a field of study that has as its raison d’être a critique of institutions, we simply reproduce existing institutions and the political power that defined and continues to frame the purposes and goals of these institutions. The framework within which I view this crucial issue was actually highlighted by Sheldon S. Wolin in his 1969 manuscript, Political Theory as a Vocation. As a historian and philosopher of education specifically and a social foundations scholar generally, I am indebted to Wolin’s contrast between the methodist and the theorist in academia, and although his arguments were directed toward the field of political science, they are relevant in any social science field today, including education.

Referencing the Oxford Universal Dictionary, Wolin (1969) defined the “Methodist” as “one who is skilled in, or attaches great importance to . . . the existence of a prescribed sequence of procedures, each step presupposing the completion of the preceding one” (1062). Examples of behaviorist methodologies used in the social sciences include, but are not limited to, “systems theories, communications theories, and structural-functional theories,” which utilize the “techniques by which data can be collected and analyzed . . . shaped by the desire
to explain certain forms of non-political phenomena.” From a political theorist’s (or a social foundations scholar’s) perspective, behavioral methodologies “offer no significant choice or critical analysis of the quality, direction, or fate of public life” (Wolin 1969, 1062–1063).

In fact, as Wolin demurred, “the behavioral movement presupposes that the fundamental purposes and arrangements served by its techniques have been settled,” and are beyond question. “Accordingly, it reinforces, tacitly or explicitly, those purposes and arrangements and operates according to a notion of alternatives tightly restricted by these same purpose and arrangements.” Furthermore, “the emphasis upon methods . . . presupposes a viewpoint which has profound implications for the empirical world, the vocation and the education of political scientists, and the resources which nourish the theoretical imagination.” This is salient because “the criteria by which one accepts or rejects statements about social life are of a special nature,” and “what matters are the common assumptions and consequences which accompany the emphasis on technique.” A focus on methods and “techniques” situates how we look at the world, and by giving “fidelity to fact” and trying to remain “objectively detached,” defined by Wolin as “vita methodica,” we have long steered social scientists to an “ethic of science” (1969, 1063–1064). With regard to scholarly activity and the training of graduate students in their fields of expertise, Wolin’s assertions are relevant to social foundations scholars and students and worth quoting at length:

The requirement that students become proficient in an assortment of technical skills preempts a substantial portion of their time and energy. But more important, training in techniques has educational consequences for it affects the way in which the initiates will look upon the world. . . . ‘Methodism’ is ultimately a proposal for shaping the mind. . . . [T]he alleged neutrality of a methodist’s training . . . reinforce[s] an uncritical view of existing political structures and all that they imply. For the employment of method assumes, even requires, that the world be of one kind rather than another if techniques are to be effective. . . . The kind of world hospitable to method invites a search for those regularities that reflect the main patterns of behavior which society is seeking to promote and maintain. . . . Every society is a structure bent in a particular and persistent way so that it constitutes not only an arrangement of power but also of powerlessness, of poverty as well as wealth, injustice and justice, suppression and encouragement. (1969, 1063–1064)

By wedding oneself to methods, social scientists—the scholars who make up most social foundations programs—often adhere to “the Cartesian path of extolling the existing as ‘the most moderate’ or ‘further removed from extremes’” (Wolin 1969, 1069). In his own field, for example, Wolin is critical “of identifying the American political system with ‘normal politics,’” which “seek[s] to establish by empirical methods the factors which produce it,” often resulting in the research conclusion “that the system has functioned normally, i.e., in a stable way, because
it has avoided immoderation . . . ‘extremism’ or ‘intensity.’” By focusing solely on method, we diminish our ability to make use of “political wisdom,” according to Wolin (1069–1070).

The contemporary Methodist performs the same act of divestment, except that he will use the language of social science in order to explain that he must, as far as possible, rid the mind of biases and preconceptions, such as those produced by class, status, occupation, family, religious upbringing, or political attachments. In so doing, he is performing a true ritual, the reenactment of the archetypal American experience of breaking with the past. (Wolin 1969, 1070)

Although objectivity cannot exist in its purest form, the Methodist nevertheless attempts to “disinvest” herself of feelings, emotions, cultural biases, and much of what makes us uniquely human, in order to avoid normative statements and commitments. As if she were following Gradgrind’s dictum to teach only facts and nothing but facts, the Methodist vexes any attempt to make normative commitments and judgments upon the world, viewing such attempts as undermining scientific objectivity (Dickens, 2007).2 Likewise, in colleges of education beginning in the early twentieth century, we know that there existed a strong impulse or “an aspiration,” according to Lagemann, “to create a ‘science of education,’” in the United States. This “science of education” increasingly adopted natural science language and techniques including emphases on “facts,” a “ubiquitous reverence for numbers,” “measurement science,” “laboratory experiments,” attempts to “diagnose” inadequate academic achievement, the “scientific method,” the presence of “educational technicians,” and “stimulus-response” experiments, all of which located educational problems, not outside schools, but within them, including individual children, teachers, methods of teaching, classroom management, curriculum choice, patterns of behavior, and so on (1997, 5–11).

“Political life,” according to Wolin, and I add education and learning, “does not yield its significance to terse hypotheses, but is elusive and hence meaningful statements about it often have to be allusive and intimative. Context becomes supremely important, for actions and events occur in no other setting.” Unlike the focus on techniques, “knowledge of this type tends . . . to be suggestive and illuminative rather than explicit and determinate.” Likewise, normative statements made by theorists are often viewed as “lack[ing] precision, quantifiability, or operational value,” which are “said to be false, vague, unreliable, or even ‘mystical.’” The distinction between method and normative analysis, in other words, “is not between the true and the false, the reliable and the unreliable, but between truth which is economical, replicable, and easily packaged, and truth which is not.” Emphasis on methodism “is relatively indifferent to context; theoretical truth,” what Wolin refers to as “tacit political knowledge,” is unable to “exist in this framework, because its foundation . . . shapes it toward what is politically appropriate rather
than toward what is scientifically operational.” Finally, “tacit political knowledge” often “concerns matters for which there can be no certitude,” and therefore “is being jeopardized by . . . education increasingly” following the methodist approach (Wolin 1969, 1070–1071).

The theorist brings to academia a “vision,” which “depends upon the richness of” the resources from which it can draw. These “extra-scientific considerations may be identified more explicitly as the stock of ideas which an intellectually curious and broadly educated person accumulates and which come to govern his intuitions, feelings, and perceptions.” This is what “constitute the sources of his creativity, yet rarely find explicit expression in formal theory” (Wolin 1969, 1073–1074). I am reminded of Martha Nussbaum’s (1997) encouraging us to develop a literary imagination and empathy by excavating realist literature. Although this choice of teaching may not be scientific, I agree with Nussbaum when she concludes that it can be rational, and in fact, like her, I agree that empathy can both inform and balance our thinking, and our reliance on traditional conceptions of rationality are incomplete and often callous and detached. We are denying what is uniquely human, she argues, by adhering so closely to facts, objectivity, and the sole use of reason, that we suppress feelings and empathy toward humanity. Empathy, she asserts, can be rational, but we look upon it in the same way that Wolin suggests that scientists look upon political theory. Nussbaum advocates developing the literary imagination to develop empathy, which is achieved through the use of realist literature.

The danger of our love affair with behaviorism “depends upon . . . mechanizing human behavior and . . . humanizing mechanical processes,” according to Wolin. Similar to what Wolin witnessed in the field of political science, many departments in colleges of education have emphasized methods over “tacit knowledge.” Methodism certainly has its important place in academia. What Wolin is arguing is that methodism has become emphasized to such an extent that it has resulted in our depreciating of the traditional normative implications that have defined the purposes of political theory for thousands of years. Likewise, he asserts, “In terms of theory, the basic thrust of contemporary political science is not antitheoretical so much as it is deflationary of theory.” The methodist tends to focus on the ‘real world,’ often criticizing the theorist for seeking “standards” that “have been set unreasonably high.” The typical outcome results in the methodist making a safe and comfortable decision to change “the theory” and not the status quo (Wolin 1969, 1076, 1082).

Just think about the enormous, and often unrealistic, expectations imposed on America’s public schools since their inception. They have endured a relentless barrage of responsibilities levied on them by policymakers and reformers who too often see schools as a panacea. Given such high expectations and so many responsibilities, as well as a lack of appreciation among policymakers for the fact that schools tend to reflect problems in the larger society rather than the reverse,
it is no wonder that normative and critical analyses within colleges of education have been, and continue to be, marginalized as they often locate internal academic problems in the unequal social, political, and economic structures outside schools. Ideology critique is more likely to transfer the responsibility of governing society from the schools to legislatures. It is much easier, however, for the latter to scapegoat schools, divert responsibility to govern, and keep the focus on schools’ inability to perfect society.

“A systems approach,” according to Wolin, “draws us away from a discussion of the way in which the political pie is cut up and how it happens to get cut up in one way rather than another.” Moreover, “the remedy for this ‘status quo bias’ is to fall back upon ‘partial theories’ which deal with selected aspects of the same system, e.g., theories of ‘decision-making, coalition strategies, game theories, power and group analysis.’” The problem with this approach, according to Wolin, “is that it merely reaffirms in different form, the same culinary assumptions about the common pie, for each partial theory claims to be a plausible account of the same whole” (1969, 1065).

It is through the scientific lens of “methodism,” according to Wolin, “that most proposals for reform on the part of political scientists represent a narrow range of alternatives founded on the assumption that the system has no inherent defects, or if it has, that these are acceptable ‘costs.’” This prevents “a genuinely theoretical discussion which would seriously question and reflect upon the qualities of the system as a whole” (Wolin 1969, 1069). According to Wolin,

The impoverishment of education by the demands of methodism poses a threat not only to so-called normative or traditional political theory, but to the scientific imagination as well. It threatens the meditative culture which nourishes all creativity. That culture is the source of the qualities crucial to theorizing: playfulness, concern, the juxtaposition of contraries, and astonishment at the variety and subtle interconnection of things. . . . An impoverished mind, no matter how resolutely empirical in spirit, sees an impoverished world. (Wolin 1969, 1073)

Wolin’s concern over methodism in political science over 40 years ago parallel in many ways various academic disciplines in colleges of education and the unique role that is served by social foundations programs. If those of us in colleges of education focused solely on fulfilling, maintaining, and perpetuating existing institutional practices, we run the risk of failing to critically reflect on and make normative judgments about the social, political, and economic systems that buttress the purposes and aims of schooling and education. Put another way, when we remain indifferent to ideals by adapting our research, practices, and our teaching to meet the functional demands currently present in society rather than trying to conform our reality to our ideals, we simply reproduce existing inequalities and injustices.
In modern society, work often does result in repression of what Sigmund Freud called “instinctual energy” or individual creativity in his 1930 publication, *Civilization and its Discontents*. Indeed, Freud made the obvious conclusion that the level of repression varies among societies and the more repressive a society, the less creativity its inhabitants enjoy. Building on Freud’s psychology, Eric Fromm asserted that ideologies serve as *rationalizations or substitute gratifications*, “which enable us to rationalize away real repression by satisfying our social, emancipatory desires” (Ingram 1990, 41). In addition, ideological maintenance, by often sustaining prejudices, illusions, and imposing limited or false social and legal constructions on people and groups, block true understanding. Jürgen Habermas’s support of critical theory in the social sciences was related to its capacity to help us interpret, reflect upon, and make normative judgments about “needs” that “ought to be met and which interests ought to be pursued,” and the ideological underpinnings of the various claims that are put forward (Ingram 1990, 116).

Those of us who advocate democratic forms of education must face the inherent complexity and dichotomies embedded in our various understanding of what this means. For instance, democracy in contemporary society is often understood as a rule or procedure to be followed to arrive at decisions, but our focus on procedural democracy prevents us from making normative conclusions about those policies. This widespread understanding of democracy is juxtaposed against what I believe many scholars in academia mean when they advocate democratic forms of education. For instance, democracy is viewed as an existential activity intended to enlighten, empower, and emancipate students by cultivating in them critical thinking supported by a pedagogy that goes beyond mere procedures by focusing substantively on historical and ideological rationalizations that lie behind social structures, including schools and education policy.

Social foundations studies supplement the professional training of future teachers by cultivating in them the ability to ideologically critique schools, schooling, the teaching profession, education, education policies, through the academic lenses that include a complex matrix of interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives. Rather than simply ambling through one’s education and fulfilling the administrative and ideological expectations within Weber’s “iron cage,” social foundations studies prepares students to question the “cage” itself and to view their world from outside the “cage.” In the same manner that Wolin contrasts the political scientist and the political theorist, social foundations studies “inaugurate a new way of looking at the world,” and “to grasp present structures and interrelationships, and to re-present them in a new way” (Wolin, 1969, 1078). Wolin compares this to Thomas Kuhn’s “extraordinary science,” and I argue that social foundations programs seek novel interpretations and perspectives in conventional education studies (1969, 1078). The “issue” for Wolin, was “not between theories which are normative and those which are not.” Instead, “it is between those who would restrict the ‘reach’ of theory by dwelling on facts which are selected by what are
assumed to be the functional requisites of the existing paradigm, and those who believe that because facts are richer than theories, it is the task of the theoretical imagination to restate new possibilities.” To parallel Wolin’s argument with the methodist techniques utilized in colleges of education, a “behaviorist who discovers that the philosophy of [democratic education] places excessive demands on the ‘real world,’” it becomes “the task of [the methodist] to suggest a more realistic version of democratic theory,” or in our case, schooling (1069, 1078, 1082).

SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS AS BRIDGING CULTURAL HORIZONS: INTERPRETATIONS

According to the Standards for Academic and Professional Instruction in Foundations of Education, the interpretative perspectives utilized by social foundations programs include those that are developed by “the humanities and the social sciences to assist students in examining, understanding, and explaining education within different contexts.” Furthermore, the purposes driving this academic framework, include analyzing the “intent, meaning, and effects of educational institutions, including schools” in order to better understand how “interpretation[s] can vary with different historical, philosophical, and cultural perspectives” (American Educational Studies Association 2012, 4).

From a critical theorist’s perspective, Hans-Georg Gadamer has proposed the use of “philosophical hermeneutics.” In other words, using Ingram’s (1990) analysis of Gadamer, “understanding serves to bridge the cultural horizons of interpreter and author by means of a shared, public language.” Put differently, “understanding of meaning is here conceived as a process of reaching mutual understanding between different cultural horizons,” and “Gadamer sees the bridging of cultures as foundational for any moral relationship” (1990, 123, emphasis added). Likewise, Immanuel Kant believed “the essence of the moral point of view consists of identifying with perspectives other than one’s own,” according to Ingram (1990, 123). By expanding our interpretations, and therefore, our understanding, of society, social structures, and our experiences beyond the methods that support phenomena, we develop “a process of moral enlightenment, of discovering and generating commonalities of interest linking oneself with others . . . through communicative understanding,” as explained by Ingram (1990, 123, emphasis added). Accordingly, “the moral point of view . . . is achieved by checking the distorting effects of one’s prejudices” (1990, 123). The term prejudice here is not necessarily used in a derogatory way. Rather, prejudices “provide the familiar reference points, questions, etc. that are necessary for opening up a dimension of possible meaningfulness in the first place” (1990, 124). Paulo Freire similarly refers to these prejudices as “thematics.” Another way of looking at this situation, according to Ingram, is that different interpretations “confront one another as participants in a Socratic dialogue. Each critically reflects its own horizon of understanding
off the other, so to speak” (Freire 2011, 101–110; Ingram 1990, 124, emphasis added).

Hermeneutics is not an interpretative process that fits neatly into any behavioral methodology; yet, it allows us in the social foundations to transcend methodologies that emphasize functional interpretations and that support already existing social arrangements in order to utilize a variety of interpretations that question the various purposes behind these very social structures—to pull back the social “veneer” (39), as Ingram (1990) refers to it, to better understand the underlying causes of and motivations for social institutions. Behaviorism, which is a methodology adopted decades ago by social scientists who saw a need to make the study of human beings analogous to the study of natural phenomena, the critical theorist attempts “to gain a critical distance from the linguistic and cultural prejudices that normally distort one’s understanding in the course of participating in popular forms of social interaction,” according to Ingram (1990, 125). Similarly, social foundations programs attempt to illicit a variety of interpretations (i.e., race, ethnic, class, gender, sexual orientation, immigrant) that serve as dialectical exercises intent on bridging, if not broadening “cultural horizons.”

SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS AS IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE

The social foundations community must always remain conscious of and actively engaged with the paradox between education and schooling, which requires persistently seeking to interpret and examine dominant ideologies that buttress the status quo. I define the parameters of this inconsistency as the difference between institutionalized schooling, understood as a society’s attempt to systematize, and therefore centralize and routinize, that information which it deems necessary to transmit to the next generation—ideological maintenance, and the goal of social foundations programs to critically reflect on this existing state of affairs.

Schooling reifies or naturalizes social structures as they presently appear through the dominant culture’s lens, giving these structures a sense of innate normalcy or having developed teleologically toward a predefined end; what Freire refers to as the “inversion of praxis.” To the contrary, education for freedom and social justice attempts to elucidate the fact that “objective social reality” is a “product of human action,” having developed by people who were (or are) often pursuing their instrumental interests, rather than having been created “by chance.” Genuine education (as opposed to schooling) takes place when teachers and students “place consumer civilization in judgment . . . attack old orders and established institutions in an attempt to affirm human beings as the Subjects of decision” (Freire 2011, 43, note 1, 51).

Again, critical theorists refer to this as ideology critique, and Jürgen Habermas’s following critique of modern society is fundamental to our understanding of the interpretive purposes underlying social foundations programs. According to
Ingram’s analysis of his work, Habermas views “capitalism” as “compel[ling] the expansion of economy and state into areas of everyday life—family, school, culture, and so on—that are not inherently disposed toward profit maximization and efficient administration.” To the contrary, “these areas of life [should be] responsible for socialization and the coordination of activities around shared norms,” which “are fulfilled only in communicative interactions in which persons try to achieve mutual understanding, free from sanctions and selfish inducements” (Ingram 1990, 185). Indeed, Habermas’s formulation is intended to respond to democratic needs at the local level that have been and are increasingly stifled by centralized commands.

The imposition of economic and political “systems of strategic, success-oriented action in which persons confront one another as obstacles or mere means,” has become so dominant in modern society, that we have diminished “value-rational commitments to justice and truthfulness, reciprocity and freedom” in favor of ideologies consumed by “profitability and status . . . mediated by money and power,” according to Ingram (1990, 185). If we were to view dominant social structures in society without utilizing various interpretations that help us understand the often hidden intent, meaning, and effects that they impose, we run the fortuitous possibility of blindly and unquestionably adapting to the dominant culture and the institutions that buttress this culture. Ira Shor describes this as antithetical to the true notion of education: “Students should be critical examiners of their experiences, questioning and interpreting their lives and education rather than merely walking through them” (Shor 2006, 30).

Weber asserted that government institutions are developed to administer the interests of the state and therefore tend toward bureaucratization and the development of priorities for institutional efficiency, standardization, and routinization (Wolin 1981). The institutionalization of education—schooling—presents a contradiction similar to what Jürgen Habermas referred to in his a Legitimation Crisis (Ingram 1990). One of his primary arguments in this work illuminates how the welfare state manages contradictions that are inherent in a capitalist system. In other words, the welfare state serves a conservative function by managing an economic system that is fraught with amoral, if not immoral, outcomes or what Habermas refers to as “rationality deficits.” In his analysis of Habermas’s theory, David Ingram concludes that, “Torn between contradictory demands—the allocation of revenues for sustaining economic growth and the compensation of the victims of such growth—the welfare state must suppress debate regarding its own foundation in a system of private property . . . and it must do so in order to procure the loyalty of its citizens” (1990, 160).

Ingram (1990) goes on to assert that, “The state is torn between too many factions to serve as an efficient, rational manager of the economy” (160). As a consequence of interest group politics, “the state is neither a simple tool for implementing the united interests of the capitalist class nor a politically neutral
mechanism for adjudicating conflicting economic interests.” In terms of critical theory, “the result is fragmentation and objectification of life” and a “destruction of moral autonomy,” particularly among the least advantaged in society. According to Ingram, “Lacking the economic, social, and political bases for equal empowerment and dignity, these victims of capitalist growth can be compensated for their misery only through cash payments that reinforce their sense of dependency and lack of self-respect” (Ingram 1990, 160–161).

My point is to illustrate the kinds of interpretive examples that often typify social foundations programs. In other words, social foundations programs critically interpret, that is excavate and tunnel through appearances and institutional veneers to understand and normatively analyze how those who have access to political power have shaped and are shaping existing social structures. As a government institution, the development of which has paralleled the structure, organization, and administrative processes prevalent in modern industrial society, schooling has evolved into a centralized system driven from the top-down and increasingly bureaucratized to serve institutional interests that are determined externally by other interests and political exigencies, often forfeiting real education. In other words, our intent to educate has increasingly resulted in establishing a process of schooling children as routinely and efficiently as possible.

The business (some would say factory) model of schooling has been present since the late nineteenth century. Nothing personifies this trend more than the recent emphasis on standardization and top-down industrial directives driving standardized curricula and assessments, privatization, and pre-packaged lesson plans. Broadly speaking, society has failed to recognize the contradictions inherent in modern schooling. We are much better overall at schooling children and less than adequate in educating them. As a result, we have objectified children by institutionalizing their learning experiences and disempowering them (and teachers) in the process. They have become what Hegel calls, “beings for another” (Freire 2011, 49).

Herein lay the importance of social foundations programs in colleges of education. As an academic discipline grounded in the liberal arts, social foundations programs serve a unique purpose in teacher preparation by giving future educators opportunities to interpret, reflect upon, and normatively critique the social, political, economic, religious, and historical dimensions of public schooling. A fundamental task of social foundations is to engage scholars, future teachers, and the overall community in what is often referred to by critical theorists as praxis, critical reflection followed by action. The work of social foundations programs confront and challenge what critical theorists refer to as the reification of social, historical, economic, political, and religious institutions; to heighten consciousness to the fact that “objective social reality exists not by chance, but as the product of human action, so it is not transformed by chance,” according to Freire (2011, 51). In other words, “humankind produce[s] social reality,” and by reifying
this reality as somehow natural, “conditions” society to accept the status quo as inevitable and unalterable. “Transforming” this material “reality is an historical task, a task for humanity,” according to Freire, and it is an essential task of social foundations programs throughout the country (2011, 51).

Although social foundations programs operate within already existing institutional structures, it is their additional task to not only critique social structures in the broader society, but to also critique the institutions within which social foundations operates. It is extremely important to transcend existing institutional structures to take part in what critical theorists refer to as ideology critique, defined by Ingram as “establishing the true interests of social agents” by helping those agents recognize “how existing needs are false” by “reveal[ing] their ideological cast” (Ingram 1990, 179).

An important purpose served by social foundations programs is to problematize existing social relations, including schools, with the hope of exposing contradictions, dichotomies, and false ideologies. To enlarge critical reflection in schools of education, social foundations programs must cultivate spaces that develop what Habermas refers to as communicative rationality with the goal to decolonize the lifeworld that has been appropriated “by the hyperextension of . . . economic and administrative system[s]” (Ingram 1990, 183). The purposes sought by social foundations programs in colleges of education parallel the distinctions between “profane politics” and “ontological politics,” as defined by Sheldon Wolin (1981, 403). Likewise, although many graduate education programs seek to fulfill the institutional demands of P–12 schooling, they often depoliticize schooling and education. Social foundations programs, on the other hand (much like many liberal arts programs), actively politicize, and therefore, problematize existing ideological presuppositions.

Much of what occurs within the walls of institutionalized teacher preparation programs is “methodology . . . engaged in the legitimation of its own political activity,” an idea described by Wolin in his differentiation between politics and political theory. The former, for example, has been “founded” or institutionalized in such a way that scientists in the field perpetuate methods that often indiscriminately support already existing paradigms rather than rupturing the paradigms’ presuppositions (Wolin 1981, 406). Social foundations content rails against any overemphasis on the use of positivist methodologies in the social sciences, including departments of education where the subject of inquiry is emphatically human oriented. Emphasis on positivist methodologies, for example, is easily manifested in policies like No Child Left Behind and Race-to-the-Top and their focus on standardized test scores and formulaic data that can make or break a school without little if any regard for the human uniqueness constituted within a school.

Contemporary schooling is very much akin to Weber’s conceptualization of rationalization. That is, “Rationalization is expressed in the mastery of modern science over nature and of bureaucratic organization over society. It signified the
status of human action in a world whose structures encased action in routines and required it to be calculating, instrumentalist, and predictable” (Wolin 1981, 412). This made “the possibilities of significant action . . . determined and limited by the constraints of rationalization” in what Weber referred to as the “iron cage.”

Today, uniform curricula, centralized organization, standardized assessments, and prepackaged lesson plans are normalized and rationalized as indispensable in our defense against a globally competitive world. Like many large government, or even corporate, bureaucracies that lose sight of their initial purposes and the interests of individual clientele, education for critical thinking is eclipsed to ensure that the institutional processes, routines, and general administrative means, remain firmly intact and functioning efficiently. Institutional processes, in other words, have assumed greater significance over and above cultivating uniquely human qualities among diverse students. Namely, we are reducing education to the process of schooling by focusing on standardization, routinization, and testing while ignoring what makes true education a uniquely human activity.

We are reducing the art of teaching to a technical skill intended to meet the demands of modern schooling, including the well-known cliché of “teaching-to-the-test.” Schooling children in order to mold them to meet predefined outcomes, has given schooling a factory-like composition at the expense of cultivating critical thinking, imagination, and creativity. Students and teachers are increasingly objectified by a system driven by standardized testing and curricula—their uniquely human characteristics, interests, and learning styles are suppressed for the purposes of adhering to organizational regimes and the production of ideological uniformity.

Today, we have neither teacher-centered nor student-centered classrooms. Rather, we have test-centered classrooms that have resulted from an ideological perspective that views students and teachers through the lens of operant conditioning, which is based on an older behaviorist methodology of imposing rewards and punishments to acclimatize students’ performance on high-stakes tests. Not unlike the influence of “Taylorism” on school organization efficiency in the early twentieth century, as well as our “aspiration[s] to create a ‘science of education,’” (Lagemann 1997, 5; Kliebard 2004, 82–83) behaviorist notions have been, and continue to be, manifested in the punitive demands of current laws, including No Child Left Behind under the erroneous presumption that this kind of schooling can meet the expectations of global competitiveness (Kozol 2005).

The idea is that if we can merely train students (assembly-line workers) by utilizing well-prepared teachers (test preparation coaches) and operant conditioning techniques used to reward and punish behaviors, we will improve academic achievement and augment comparative competitive advantage in the global community. Because schools are now driven by national goals and subject to numerous top-down policies and mandates, administered by the concomitant growth in state education agencies, efficiency and adherence to rules and regulations have taken on substantial import with diminishing regard toward structural issues outside
schools that continue to have greater impacts on learning. By prescribing a particular technical form of education to meet the functional demands of powerful interest groups, we contribute to a form of oppression that, as Freire asserts, “interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human” (2011, 55). We prescribe and impose an undemocratic form of education on children that ignores or denies their ontological status and diminishes true education by enhancing the processes of schooling.

One of the significant outcomes of this highly centralized governance and standardization has resulted in corresponding responses by many colleges of education. In other words, the very purposes for their existence results in colleges of education being compelled to preparing future teachers to work within and professionally respond to the demands of policies like No Child Left Behind. As a result, professional training of teachers includes methodological approaches that support the centralized demands made by Washington and administered by the states, respectively. What ensues in the research agendas of colleges of education is a significant focus on Methodism, as understood by Sheldon Wolin and described previously.

Working among a variety of academicians and practitioners who accept as part of their goals to fulfill the ideological and functional needs of existing schools and the Methodist research often required to do so, social foundations scholars are situated for the unique purpose of providing the kind of critical analysis sought by Wolin’s political theorist. Namely, social foundations programs are unique in colleges of education in that one of their primary goals is to provide not a “scientific ethic,” but a research ethic that includes critical interpretative, reflective, and normative judgments about social structures generally and schools and schooling specifically. We must not lose site of the fact that although crises may emerge among competing methods of scientific inquiry, crises exist also in how we create and institutionalize our world (Wolin 1969, 1080).

I agree with Lagemann’s conclusions that colleges of education must “erode . . . [the] boundaries between research, development, and evaluation, as well as between policy and practice,” not only within education departments, but also with other departments (1997, 15). Research methods are incredibly important, but they should never exclude (or be excluded by) the rich scholarly benefits exemplified in interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives utilized in social foundations programs. In doing so, we remain committed to one of the most fundamental and enduring goals of higher education.

Notes

1. As apparatuses of the state, schools have been expected to take on a variety of responsibilities intended to maintain dominant ideologies including, but not limited to, the teaching of specific moral and ethical values, as well as fulfilling the purposes of federal policies, such as the 1954 National Defense Education Act, The 1965 Elementary and Secondary
Education Act, and its 2002 reauthorization identified as No Child Left Behind. On the growing expectations and responsibilities imposed on public schools, see William Reese (2007).

2. The reference to Gradgrind is from Charles. Dickens’s *Hard Times*, which served as his literary criticism of industrialization in 1854.

3. According to Wolin’s understanding of Weber,

“the cage is iron because the main forces of modern life, science, capitalism, and bureaucratic organization are triumphs of rationality and so the mind has no purchase point to attack them. They are mind incarnated into legal codes and administrative organizations that promise order, predictable decisions, regularity of procedures, and responsible, objective, and qualified officials; into economies that operate according to principles of calculated advantage, efficiency, and means-ends strategies; and into technologies that promote standardization, mechanical behavior, and uniform tastes. The advantages of rationalization in terms of power and material satisfaction are so overwhelming that the historical process which has brought that system is ‘irreversible.’ But, finally, the cage is iron because ‘the fulfillment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values.’ Instead of being fired by religious, ethical, and political ideals, action has become simply a response to ‘economic compulsion’ or to ‘purely mundane passions’” (1981, 415).

REFERENCES


