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The Roles of Youth in Society: A Reconceptualization

Ruthanne Kurth-Schai

The 1980s have been characterized as a decade of platforms for educational change. In 1983 alone, five reports were released by national task forces and commissions, all expressing serious concern for the future of youth and society, and all proposing recommendations for ways in which educational policies and practices might be altered to address such concerns.[1]

Ultimately, all models of education are derived from systems of shared assumptions concerning the nature of childhood, patterns of child development, and the roles of youth in society.[2] Conceptualizations regarding youth are social constructions, and as such, they vary throughout history and from culture to culture. Yet, regardless of social and historical context, prevailing adult expectations exert significant influence on the range and nature of thought and action expressed by children.[3] It is therefore essential that educational policies and practices are developed on the basis of expectations that are both realistic and non-limiting, thereby allowing young people to express their full potential in supportive and safe environments. Ironically, although each task force and commission worked to provide comprehensive consideration of relationships among economic, political, philosophical, and psychological factors, this essential issue seems to have been repeatedly overlooked.

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Results of recent research suggest that the images of childhood embraced by modern industrialized nations require substantial revision because they more clearly reflect the interests and ideologies of adults than the complex and varied experiences of youth.[4] Recommendations for educational reform based upon current sociocultural expectations are therefore called into question. The purpose of this essay is to encourage reconsideration of educational policy issues in light of the social and psychological implications of both contemporary and emergent conceptualizations of childhood.

Current Conceptualizations of Childhood

Contemporary thought concerning the nature of childhood appears to be dominated by three distinct images, each focusing on a specific societal role commonly assigned to youth.[5] For comparative purposes, these may be mapped along a youth-in-society continuum.

Positioned at one end of the continuum is the image of *children as victims of adult society*, characterized by the assumption that children are vulnerable and in need of adult protection. This image was first promoted during the early years of the industrial revolution in order to protect youth from exploitation for economic purposes. It is well represented today in a series of widely read texts which document the victimization of children by physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, divorce, inadequate child care and educational practices, negative peer pressure, drugs, television, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, or premature parenthood.[6] Young people fortunate enough to escape these hazards may be still victimized as objects of adult sentimentalization. As noted by Zelizer, the domestication and privatization of children, accomplished during the early 1900s, has resulted in displacement of prevailing images of children as "useful" by images of children as "economically worthless but emotionally priceless."[7] The sentimentalization of children in middle- and upper-class settings is reinforced by current trends favoring delayed, small, and relatively affluent families. Because they serve as primary sources of parental self-validation and pride, such children are often subjected to inappropriate levels and types of parental and academic pressure contributing to what Elkind has identified as the hurried child syndrome.[8]

Positioned at the other end of the youth-in-society continuum is the image of *children as threats to adult society*, characterized by the assumption that youth are dangerous and in need of adult control. Also originating

during the early years of industrialization, this image has gained prominence periodically throughout the twentieth century. It has been suggested that compulsory public education and child labor laws were most actively promoted by those concerned primarily with the protection of adult labor interests rather than the safety and welfare of children.[9] More recently, images of youth as threats to established political, educational, and moral conventions have been expressed as public outcries against youth participation in civil rights and anti-war protests during the 1960s, classroom violence during the 1970s, and gang warfare during the 1980s. The prevalence of this image in contemporary society is further demonstrated by the extent to which parental attitudes and social welfare policies contribute to the impoverishment of economically disadvantaged youth. Zelizer contends that because Americans fail to extend parental altruism to other people's children, youth in need of public support are perceived as a social problem and assisted only if the investment of public funds can be justified in economic terms. As summarized by Grubb and Lazerson, "In contrast to the deep love we feel and express in private, we lack any sense of 'public love' for children."[10]

Representing an intermediary position between the preceding two is the image of *children as learners of adult society*, characterized by the assumption that children are incomplete, incompetent, and in need of adult guidance. As guidance may include both elements of protection and control, assumptions derived on the basis of this conceptualization may be used in support of philosophical and political positions associated with either of the first two images. The image of youth as recipients of adult culture arose in relation to academic endorsement of 20th century models of child development. Included are socialization and enculturation theories promoted by sociologists and anthropologists, and universal stage theories promoted by developmental psychologists. As noted by Kagan, these models share the assumption that human development progresses in an orderly and predictable fashion toward a hypothetical ideal.[11] Thus, while adults are commonly perceived in terms of present activities and experiences, children are understood in terms of their potential as adults-in-the-making.[12] Kagan further suggests that societies project onto children qualities opposite of those prized in adults[13] — youth therefore are perceived in terms of incapacities and inabilities, and it is assumed that adult intervention (e.g., role modeling, direct instruction, environmental design) is essential for their proper development.

Although they represent contrasting interpretations of the roles of

youth in society, contemporary images of childhood are united in their failure to acknowledge the potential of young people to contribute to the social order. Youth are confronted with confusing and contradictory patterns of protection and pressure, with conflicting perceptions of their abilities and inadequacies, rendering their social presence inconsequential and their social power invisible. Goodman refers to this phenomenon as the "underestimation fallacy" and contends that it represents a serious misconception concerning the nature of childhood, reflected in the minimal expectations provided for children in modern industrialized societies. She observes that, "in the matter of minimal expectations, modern American middle-class city people have probably no peers in all the world. They may expect developmental precocity, or at least rejoice in it . . . but this is quite unlike an expectation of work and the assumption of real responsibility."[14]

The types of tasks assigned to youth indicate that young people are not expected to contribute to the welfare of the family nor the community. Results of cross-cultural research reveal that the major, and often only, responsibility assigned to children is that of academic achievement, a task performed primarily for the benefit of the individual rather than for the benefit of society.[15] Social critics further suggest that the underestimation fallacy is sanctioned by current legal and educational systems. Toffler proposes that due to widespread preoccupation with individual academic achievement, contemporary youth are required to spend many years isolated from the realities of community life in artificial environments called schools. In this manner, they are deprived of "participation either in significant community decision-making or in socially approved productive work."[16] Similarly, Boulding argues that legal restrictions serve to limit the social contributions of youth. Within the context of contemporary legal thought, opportunities to exercise personal freedom and social responsibility are determined by age rather than demonstrated competence. Therefore, regardless of individual abilities and aptitudes, the child is perceived as "immature, incompetent, and manipulable for 'its' own good." Manipulation of children is carried out "by the states through the legal system, and by the family through custom supported by law." By perceiving children as legally dependent, Boulding insists, "we move away from the young person as subject, actor, and shaper of society, to the child as object, the 'sheltered' and victimized member of society."[17]

To summarize, based upon current expectations concerning the

social potential of childhood, youth are excluded from active and meaningful participation in human society. More specifically, by conceptualizing children as objects of sentimentalization we trivialize their thoughts and actions. By seeing children as objects of socialization we obscure their "social insight and environment-shaping competence."[18] By regarding children as victims we obscure their potential for adaptation and survival. By perceiving children as threats to society we ignore their potential as catalysts for positive social change. The social and psychological consequences of perpetuating the image of youth as socially useless would be quite serious. As we move toward future environments characterized by increasing challenge, change, complexity, and choice, higher levels of personal responsibility, tolerance of diversity, cooperation, and creativity will be required.[19] In order to adapt and flourish, children need to develop a strong sense of self-worth and social commitment. By denying their potential to contribute to society we limit children's ability to develop these traits.

It is through the performance of tasks contributing to the welfare of others that children develop a sense of personal worth and competence, and learn to be nurturant and responsible.[20] The Whitings' comparison of the nature of childhood in six cultures reveals that in societies that encourage children to perform socially significant tasks, children's behavior is dominated by attempts to offer help, support, and responsible suggestions. Children's competence in these areas also provides a source of pleasure and pride. In contrast, in societies that exclude children from contributing to the family and the community, the Whitings observed behavior dominated by attempts to acquire help, attention, and personal dominance. Because their actions appear to have little impact on the welfare of others, it is difficult for such children to validate their sense of self-worth except in terms of personal achievement. It is also difficult to develop a strong sense of community spirit. These observations are supported by the results of a collection of sociological, psychological, and private studies, indicating that youth participation in socially and/or economically useful tasks is associated with heightened self-esteem, enhanced moral development, increased political activism, and the ability to create and maintain complex social relationships.[21] Related studies demonstrate that lack of participation is associated with rigid and simplistic relational strategies, psychological dependence on external sources for personal validation, and the expression of self-destructive and anti-social behaviors including drug abuse, depression, promiscuity, premature parenthood, suicide, and deliquency.[22]

The consequences of failing to acknowledge the social potential of childhood are serious not only for today's children. Indeed, the welfare of human society as a whole is jeopardized.

> The secret message communicated to most young people today by the society around them is that they are not needed, that the society will run itself quite nicely until they — at some distant point in the future — will take over the reins. Yet the fact is that the society is not running itself nicely . . . because the rest of us *need* all the energy, brains, imagination and talent that young people can bring to bear on our difficulties. For society to attempt to solve its desperate problems without the full participation of even very young people is imbecile.[23]

Kurth-Schai's research substantiated Toffler's claim that today's children are well aware of the underestimation fallacy and its negative effects on the quality of life in contemporary society.[24] Although children desire to contribute to society, and believe they possess the ability to do so, they feel constrained by adult misconceptions. The participants in the study identified prevailing adult perceptions of youth as the major obstacle limiting their capacity to contribute. They proposed that, because most adults seriously underestimate children's potentials, children have no social power and their ideas are neither solicited nor respected.

In order to alter the current situation, prevailing expectations concerning the social potential of youth must be revised. The invisible power of childhood must be acknowledged and integrated within the processes of social design and civic action. The time has come to reconceptualize the roles of youth in society and to rediscover the aware and inventive child.

Toward a Reconstructed Conceptualization of Childhood

It is likely that emerging conceptualizations of childhood, based upon a growing body of theoretical and empirical evidence, will more accurately reflect children's demonstrated and proposed potential to discover and interpret the world, to shape their own development, to create culture, and to catalyze processes of positive social change. Meanwhile, to explore adequately the complex and varied experiences of youth, it will be necessary to reconsider the philosophic assumptions that structure contemporary research and to redesign the methodologies of research.[25]

Indications of the social potential of youth are revealed in the literature of many disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, and the biological and social sciences. There is a wealth of anthropological

evidence suggesting that children are competent to assume a variety of serious social obligations and responsibilities at early ages.[26] Within non-industrialized societies children as young as age three typically assume duties such as carrying wood and water, cleaning and other household chores, gathering and preparing food, gardening, and caring for younger siblings and animals. All of these tasks, even from a child's perspective, clearly contribute to the welfare of the family and involve both concrete and serious consequences for failure. The fact that very young children are routinely assigned the responsibility of infant care is particularly important as it requires a high degree of competence and commitment.

> The care of infants requires constant attention and enough experience to be able both to predict and to change behavior. A child nurse must be able to guess the needs and motivations of his or her small charge and learn what behavior is required to satisfy these needs, the essence of nurturance as we have defined it. The consequences of failure are clear: ignorance or negligence can lead to injury or death.[27]

Boulding also cites numerous studies indicating that the contribution of children as nurturers is a widespread phenomenon which significantly enhances the quality of human life. In addition to providing care for infants, children have demonstrated an impressive capacity to provide nurturance for their peers and for adults, especially during times of severe stress.[28] The capacity of children has also been acknowledged to contribute to the economic well-being of their families and friends, to bear and raise children, and to provide leadership during political and religious movements. Others have documented the capacities of children to renew adults' access to playful and creative activities, to catalyze parental self-reflection and decision making, to engage in complex, creative, and independently generated political, moral, and philosophic thought, and to act on the basis of their convictions in real-life settings.[29]

It is further proposed that children contribute uniquely to our understanding of ourselves by embodying certain singular human characteristics and capabilities. For example, Cobb contends that the imaginative experiences of childhood represent humanity's primary source of personal and cultural evolutionary potential. She identifies two distinctive qualities, "plasticity of response to the environment" and "passionate world-making behavior," which provide the basis for social inventiveness. Although repeatedly and spontaneously expressed in childhood, neither quality persists into adult life. It is thus suggested that the key to human survival and progress lies in enhancing the

capacity of adults to recall and utilize the "compassionate intelligence of childhood" as a social and political tool.[30] Montagu reiterates and reinterprets Cobb's work in light of the theory of neotony. Based upon biological and archaeological data, the theory proposes that humanity's most valuable evolutionary strategy is the retention into adult life of traits associated with childhood.

> Yet the truth about the human species is that in body, spirit, feeling, and conduct we are designed to grow and develop in ways that emphasize rather than minimize childlike traits. We are programmed to remain in many ways childlike; we were never intended to grow "up" into the kind of adults most of us have become . . . . What precisely, are those traits of childhood behavior that are so valuable and that tend to disappear gradually as human beings grow older? We have only to watch children to see them clearly displayed: Curiosity . . . ; imaginativeness; playfulness; open-mindedness; willingness to experiment; flexibility; humor; energy; receptiveness to new ideas; honesty; eagerness to learn; and perhaps the most pervasive and the most valuable of all, the need to love.[31]

Other observers have also felt that children possess an unparalleled potential to catalyze positive social change through the development and expression of diverse, exploratory, and optimistic images of future societies. Boulding, for instance, contends that a "whole range of fresh new perceptions about personhood and human potentiality and alternative modes of social problem-solving exist in the hidden spaces of the child's world."[32] Lorenzo likewise perceives children as "carriers of special utopian sensibility."[33] Masini suggests that children possess a power which adults have lost, the power to create images of radically different future societies built by democratic participation in the process of social reform.[34] In the words of Sir Read, "Great changes in the destiny of mankind can be effected only in the minds of little children."[35] This unparalleled capacity of children to envision desirable societal futures has been attributed to three unique characteristics of childhood — (a) the special relationship of children to the future, (b) the special relationship of children to the process of change, and (c) the unique ability of children to recreate the world through play.

The special relationship of children to the future is best described by Mead, who proposes that humanity is currently moving toward the establishment of prefigurative cultures in which the future dominates the present and adults will look to children as representative of what is to come. By observing children, adults will learn to confront successfully the challenges of life in a rapidly changing world. Children are not tied

to the traditions of the past, and their perceptions of the present and the future are not constrained by previous experience. For these reasons, the dominant educational pattern in prefigurative cultures will be that of adults learning from children, and their relationships will be characterized by interdependence. As we move toward the future, the mutually enhancing relationships between youth and adults will be among the most valuable of human resources. Mead contends that the further development of human society depends upon "the existence of a continuing dialogue in which the young, free to act on their initiative, can lead their elders in the direction of the unknown . . . . The children, the young, must ask the questions that we would never think to ask, but enough trust must be re-established so that the elders will be permitted to work with them on the answers."[36]

As for the special relationship of children to the process of change, Cobb suggests that children, by virtue of their neurological structure and functioning, are capable of perceiving the world in a continually transforming state and of sensing its infinite possibilities.[37] Based upon a collection of studies conducted with Italian youth, Masini similarly asserts that young people possess a unique capacity to store and to cultivate the seeds of change, a capacity arising from a heightened ability to listen and to "sense the energy and the authentic feelings within the structure of the (social) system."[38] Moreover, children are easily involved in transcending their own experience. Although their images reveal a sense of continuity with the past and an intense awareness of the present, children have not yet been conditioned to anticipate only one possible future reality. They have little difficulty thinking in terms of alternatives. For these reasons, Masini proposes that children tend to produce images of the future which are deeper, more integrated, and more global than those expressed by adults.

The ability to recreate the world through play represents perhaps the most important social contribution of childhood. According to Cobb, children between the ages of six and twelve are continually involved in concrete attempts to shape personal and societal realities to reflect better the private utopian worlds they create through play.[39] Continuation of the "passionate world-making behavior" into adolescence, characterized by political and philosophic idealism and impatience for transformational social change, has also been documented.[40] Results of recent studies further suggest that social problem-solving skills and other creative behavioral strategies are

most frequently expressed and most effectively developed through free-form peer play.[41] Thus it is even proposed by some that recognition of the societal value of play "is perhaps the major discovery of the twentieth century" for, although "science cannot save us, play may."[42]

To summarize, due to their special relationship to the future and to the process of change, children are particularly well-suited to envision a vast array of exploratory societal alternatives. Due to their unique capacity to reshape reality through play, it is possible that children more readily assume optimistic and action-oriented attitudes towards the process of social reform. It is therefore proposed that young people possess an unparalleled potential to contribute to the development of human society by generating, expressing, and acting upon optimistic images of societal futures. Additional evidence supporting this proposal has been obtained in research projects designed to construct comprehensive descriptions of children's future imagery, the most extensive of these being the series conducted by Lorenzo and Nicholson, begun in 1977 and continuing today.[43] More than one thousand children from eight different countries have participated, and the results indicate that children's images of the future incorporate powerful utopian elements. According to Lorenzo, children participating throughout the world have expressed "images which hold out a tremendous hope for the future of humanity."[44] Similar results were obtained by Kurth-Schai, who found children intensely interested in and very proficient at describing the nature and creation of ideal future societies. Their perceptions of the future were dominated by spiritual images representing both utopian and religious belief systems. The majority of participating children agreed that both youth and adults will play significant roles in the design and creation of future societies radically different from and far superior to those of the present.[45]

Results from the Lorenzo and Nicholson projects also demonstrate that children's images of the future can play a catalytic role in the development of adults' future imagery and social contributions. Both researchers cite examples of sessions during which children's images of societal futures were shared with adults through child-created media presentations. Such presentations catalyzed involvement of parents, community residents, and representatives of academic, business, and social service organizations in a variety of community development projects. Such findings provide an indication of the capacity of youth to create images of the future powerful enough to

guide and motivate positive social change. Additionally, young people have demonstrated capacities to provide leadership, nurturance, and economic assistance. In a world characterized by widespread feelings of purposelessness and powerlessness, the social contributions of childhood represent a primary source of humanity's hope for the future.

Educational Implications

Today's youth spend a large portion of their waking hours in educational institutions. Consequently, educators have a unique opportunity to facilitate reconceptualization of the roles of youth in society and contribute to the rediscovery of the aware and inventive child by promoting three parallel processes.

Reconceptualizing the roles of youth in the classroom. We live in a unique period of human history. While historically cultures have formed stationary patterns that occasionally evolve to other stationary patterns, humanity, for the first time, is now experiencing life in nonstationary cultures characterized by rapid and transformational change.[46]

Contemporary educational institutions, policies, and practices were designed to address the challenges of life in relatively stationary industrial societies. According to Durkheim, Parsons, and Bowles, the growing need for production of a highly skilled and specialized labor force led to the development of universal, free, compulsory, and secular educational systems throughout the United States and Western Europe. Within modern industrialized nations the primary functions of schooling became socialization, or the assimilation of prevailing societal norms and perceptions, and selection, or the tracking of individuals most qualified to assume specific future roles into appropriate paths of preparation.[47] With the assumption that standardization, synchronization, and specialization of thought and action result in increased academic efficiency and productivity, it was important to shape students to conform to a limited number of clearly defined societal roles and expectations, a task best accomplished when students are conceived as *receptacles of knowledge.*

Today a significant shift in societal context is well under way, and life in nonstationary postindustrial cultures generates new educational imperatives. As stated by Jantsch and Waddington, "We have arrived at a new evolutionary threshold, marked by a novel and unique task . . . this task amounts to the conscious creation of culture, the conscious design of a life of continuous qualitative change, pluralism,

uncertainty, variability, and high fluctuation."[48] On the assumption that diversity, flexibility, and innovation are essential for human survival and progress, it becomes important to assist students in the development of increasingly complex, creative, and socially oriented self-definitions. This task is best accomplished by conceptualizing students as *creators, disseminators, and implementors of knowledge.* Students are therefore encouraged to assume more active and discretionary roles in shaping their educational experience, in sharing the results of that experience with peers and adults, and in generating and applying new knowledge to benefit themselves and society.

Zelizer suggests that a collection of new societal opportunities (e.g., the rise of home-based economic activities and an ideology of domestic democracy) and challenges (e.g., the rise of two career and single parent families) may lead to restoration of the "economically useful child." Assuming part-time salaried positions as "housechildren," youth may provide invaluable services in managing future households.[49] Extension of this "housechild" notion into the classroom points to a number of exciting possibilities. For example, rather than limiting the teaching contributions of youth to those typically provided by peer tutors (i.e., one-on-one remedial assistance for same-age or younger students), academically motivated students might assume the role of *educatorchild.* This role could encompass activities such as providing instruction for learners of all ages in addition to the design, selection, and implementation of curriculum, evaluation procedures, and motivational strategies. Rather than limiting the research contributions of young people to those they have traditionally provided as research subjects, students might assume the role of *scholarchild.* Through their participation in selecting areas of inquiry, designing methods, conducting research, and interpreting, applying, and disseminating results, young people might help to generate more accurate and inclusive theories of child development, and more effective and productive approaches to teaching and learning. Additional opportunities could be provided for youth to develop and demonstrate their talents as artists, philosophers, consultants, inventors, politicians, administrators, etc., in classroom settings. By providing opportunities for the *educationally useful child* to focus creative insight and energy on important pedagogical issues, it may be possible to expand the resources currently available to the nation's schools and to catalyze processes of educational renewal.

Reconceptualizing areas of curricular emphasis. As the roles of youth in contemporary classrooms change, so too must areas of curricular

emphasis change to retain relevance. In stationary cultures of the recent past, well-designed curriculum assisted students in the assimilation and application of prescribed bodies of knowledge. Today in the midst of the Information Age, perceptions of reality continually change and meaning varies in relation to context. Bruner describes education as a negotiatory process whereby knowledge is created and attributed meaning on the basis of social consensus,[50] while Maruyama describes education as a trans-epistemological process whereby individuals develop the skills and attitudes necessary to view the world from many different perspectives, to evaluate alternative perspectives critically, and then to transcend currently held perspectives to discover, explore, invent, and reality-test new ones.[51]

In light of these theoretical positions, curriculum is designed to enhance creative thinking, critical analysis, and social problem-solving skills. More specifically, subject matter areas and instructional methods are selected, which emphasize:

1) youth-directed learning experiences during which opportunities are provided for young people to shape their educational experience in accordance with personal interests, aptitudes, needs, and values;[52]

2) cross-generational learning experiences during which opportunities are provided for young people to share their talents, insights, questions, and concerns with younger children and adults;

3) exploratory learning experiences during which opportunities are provided for young people to generate and share a broad spectrum of alternative conceptions of reality and approaches to problem-solving through active participation in free-form conceptual and physical play;

4) integrative learning experiences during which opportunities are provided for young people to perceive issues in terms of a wide range of interrelated possibilities and consequences, and to experience mutually beneficial interactions between affect and cognition, analysis and intuition, awareness and action, theory and practice, personal relevance and social significance;[53]

5) cooperative learning experiences during which opportunities are provided for young people to experience the personal and societal benefits of adopting supportive and egalitarian approaches to the design and achievement of shared goals;[54] and

6) action-oriented learning experiences during which opportunities are provided for young people to make decisions of personal and societal consequence, and to contribute to the welfare of others through active participation in attempts to initiate and direct positive social and educational change.[55]

A review of American educational history reveals a long tradition of

innovations promoting the areas of curricular emphasis identified above. Various components are reflected in more than half a century of educational movements from the Progressive and community schools movements of the early 1900s through the Reconstructionist/educational futures, alternative schools, and feminist pedagogy movements extending into the present. They are further reflected in the design of specific contemporary programs including the Foxfire projects, Future Problem Solvers, Olympics of the Mind, Peace Child, and a variety of international youth exchange programs. To varying degrees, however, the programs and movements cited incorporate a common set of limitations. Today, as in the past, most youth-oriented educational innovations (a) address issues that stem from adults' perceptions of children's needs, rather than children's perceptions of children's needs, (b) offer limited opportunities for youth leadership while adults maintain primary responsibility for program direction and control of resources, (c) perceive desired results in terms of contributions to participants' personal growth, rather than contributions to the welfare of society, and (d) are inaccessible to the vast majority of youth.[56]

Curricular innovations offering simulated participation in adult society, on adult terms, to exceptional youth only are not sufficient to promote realization of children's unique and varied potentials for social design and civic action. Children's perceptions of social problems and opportunities, of appropriate organizational structure and process, may differ qualitatively from those of adults. Their perceptions may differ from those of their peers based upon gender, class, race, and variations in academic ability. In order to utilize their varied talents and perceptions as a social resource, it is important for youth from diverse backgrounds to work together in coalitions designed to provide opportunities for their young members to (i) determine the areas of freedom, responsibility, and service in which they would like to participate; (ii) assume primary control of administrative processes; and (iii) receive recognition and/or compensation for the services they provide. A variety of curricular innovations structured to grant "actual" rather than "preparatory" power are workable within the context of contemporary educational and social service settings. Included are youth-directed publications, audio-visual productions, research and community service projects, internship programs, think tanks, speakers bureaus, exchange programs, lobbying and public education groups, and philanthropic foundations. Encouraging student participation in such activities could do much to promote the develop-

ment of a curriculum that is comprehensive, comparative, and visionary, a curriculum that promotes heightened self-esteem and social commitment.

Reconceptualizing the role of the school in society. Today, as in the past, conflicting conceptions of the role of the school in society lead to heated controversy. Although the debate between educational traditionalists and reconstructionists continues, the past few years have witnessed significant movement toward the academic "right." If educational institutions are to provide support for youth as they exercise higher levels of personal freedom and social responsibility, this trend cannot continue.[57] In stationary cultures it is appropriate for schools to function primarily as *museums*, emphasizing the collection, preservation, and application of knowledge and values that have stood the test of time. In societies characterized by rapid, transformational change it is more appropriate for schools to function primarily as *laboratories*, emphasizing the design, simulation, and evaluation of alternative personal and societal futures within safe and supportive environments.

In the tradition of Kant who, in the late 1700s, proposed that we educate not for the present but for a possibly improved condition of humanity in the future; of Counts who, in 1932, asserted that the creation of a future immeasurably more just, noble, and beautiful than the present is the most important educational task; of Brameld who, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, advocated fundamental reconstruction of all social institutions through the process of education, we may today continue to promote conceptualization of the school as an agent of cultural transformation rather than cultural transmission.[58] As stated by Bruner, the central concern of education should be "how to create in the young an appreciation of the fact that many worlds are possible, that meaning and reality are created and not discovered," for we have the power through education "to redesign reality and to reinvent culture."[59]

Theoretical and empirical evidence presented in this essay suggests that contemporary expectations concerning the nature of childhood discourage young people from contributing to society. The consequences of failing to acknowledge and utilize the social contributions of childhood are quite serious. Children fail to develop a strong sense of self-worth and social commitment while adults fail to benefit from the new perceptions, creative insight, idealism, energy, and enthusiasm

children are capable of providing. We therefore face a difficult and important challenge. The time is here to reconceptualize the roles of youth in society on the basis of expectations that are both realistic and non-limiting, and to take steps to involve young people in the processes of social design and civic action. As educators we may begin to accomplish these tasks by encouraging the development of children's complex, creative, and cooperative thought processes, by providing opportunities for young people to act upon their thoughts in real-life social settings, and by promoting reconceptualization of the roles of the student in the classroom and the school in society . As opportunities are provided for children to participate actively in guiding the development of human society, hope for the future of humanity and hope for the future of children themselves are mutually enhanced.

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2. Throughout this essay such terms as "childhood," "children" and "youth" refer to the period of an individual's life prior to the attainment of legal adult status, i.e., from birth through age 18 or 21.
3. Phillipe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962); Elise Boulding, *Children's Rights and the Wheel of Life* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1979); John Cleverly and D.C. Phillips, *Visions of Childhood: Influential Models from Locke to Spock* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986); Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Margaret Mead, *Culture and Commitment* (New York: Natural History Press/Doubleday, 1970); Mary Ellen Goodman, *The Culture of Childhood* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1970); John and Beatrice Whiting, *Children of Six Cultures* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975).
4. Prevailing assumptions concerning the nature of childhood are now challenged by a growing body of research. There is evidence to suggest that children's experiences and actions are misrepresented and misinterpreted in light of (a) adult's political and economic interests [e.g., Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child;* James S. Coleman, ed., *Youth: Transition to Adulthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, *Youth in the 1980s* (Paris: Presses Centrales de Lausanne, 1981)] and of (b) age, gender, class, cultural, and epistemological biases [e.g., Barrie Thorne, "Re-Visioning Women and Social Change: Where Are the Children?,"

Gender & Society 1 (March 1987): pp. 85-109; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); William Kessen, "The American Child and Other Cultural Inventions," *American Psychologist* 34 (October 1974): 815-820; Jerome Kagan, *The Nature of the Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Matthew Speier, "The Adult Ideological Viewpoint in Studies of Childhood, in *Rethinking Childhood*, ed. Arlene Skolnick (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), pp. 168-186; Goodman, *The Culture of Childhood;* Ashley Montagu, *Growing Young* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981); Gareth Matthews, *Dialogues with Children* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), and *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980)].

5. Thorne, "Re-Visioning Women and Social Change."
6. David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1981); Vance Packard, *Our Endangered Children* (Boston: Little Brown, 1983); Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982); Valerie Suransky, *The Erosion of Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Marie Winn, *Children without Childhood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).
7. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child.*
8. Elkind, *The Hurried Child.*
9. See, e.g., Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child;* Coleman, *Youth;* Christopher Lucas, *Foundations of Education: Schooling and the Social Order* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984).
10. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child,* p. 216
11. Jerome Kagan, Richard Kearsley, and Philip Zelazo, *Infancy: Its Place in Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978).
12. Thorne, "Re-Visioning Women and Social Change," p. 93.
13. Kagan, *The Nature of the Child;* see also Montagu, *Growing Young,* and Goodman, *The Culture of Childhood.*
14. Goodman, *The Culture of Childhood,* p. 66
15. Whiting and Whiting, *Children of Six Cultures.*
16. Alvin Toffler "The Psychology of the Future," in *Learning for Tomorrow,* ed. Alvin Toffler (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 15
17. Boulding, *Children's Rights,* p. 62, 60.
18. Boulding, *Children's Rights,* p. xiii.
19. See, e.g., Alvin Toffler, ed., *The Futurists* (New York: Random House, 1972); Erich Jantsch and Conrad Waddington eds., *Evolution and Consciousness: Human Systems in Transition* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1976); Magoroh Maruyama, "Toward Human Futuristics," *General Systems 17* (1972): p. 3-15.
20. Whiting and Whiting, *Children of Six Cultures.*
21. Coleman, *Youth;* Glen H. Elder, *Children of the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); Robert Coles, *The Moral Life of Children* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986), and *The Political Life of Children* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986); Marion Dobbert and Betty Cooke, "The Biological Foundations of Education: A Primate Based Perspective," *Educational Foundations* 1 (Spring 1987): 67-86.
22. Dobbert and Cooke, "Biological Foundations of Education," Kagan, *The Nature of the Child;* Franco Ferrarotti, "Youth in Search of a New Social Identity," in UNESCO, *Youth in the 1980s,* pp. 305-320; David Elkind, *A Sympathetic Understanding of the Child: Birth to Sixteen* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1978); Robert Biehler and Jack

Snowman, *Psychology Applied to Teaching* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986); William Glasser, *Control Theory in the Classroom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

23. Toffler, "The Psychology of the Future," p. 15; also see the good summary by Boulding, *Children's Rights*, pp. 96, 137.
24. Ruthanne Kurth-Schai, "Reflections from the Hearts and Minds of Children: A Delphi Study of Children's Personal, Global, and Spiritual Images of the Future," (Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1985. One hundred and fifty 5th and 6th grade children participated in this study. See pp. 71-124 for a detailed description of the Delphi method and its adaptation for use with children).
25. It is beyond the scope of this essay to include a full discussion of proposed philosophic and procedural biases that characterize contemporary research concerning the nature of childhood. Relevant resources include Kagan, *The Nature of the Child;* Thorne, "Re-Visioning Women and Social Change;" Coles, *Political Life of Children.*
26. Goodman, *The Culture of Childhood.*
27. Whiting and Whiting, *Children of Six Cultures,* p. 106.
28. Boulding, *Children's Rights.* Also see William Corsaro, *Friendship and Peer Culture in the Early Years* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1985).
29. Beverly T. Purrington, "Effects of Children on Their Parents: Parents' Perceptions" (Doctoral dissertation, Michigan State University, 1980); Coles, *Political Life of Children,* and *Moral Life of Children;* Douglas Maynard, "On the Functions of Social Conflict among Children," *American Sociological Review* 50 (April 1985): 207-223; Matthews, *Dialogues with Children,* and *Philosophy and the Young Child.*
30. Edith Cobb, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), and "Ecology of the Imagination," *Daedalus* 88 (Summer 1959): 538-548.
31. Montagu, *Growing Young,* p. 2.
32. Boulding, *Children's Rights,* p. 96.
33. Raymond Lorenzo, "Emerging Utopian Sensibility in Children: Its Communication with Adults — Some Considerations," (Paper for discussion, United Nations Working Group on Household, Gender and Age Consultation (Rome, April 1982), p. 4.
34. Eleonora Masini, "Women and Children as Builders of the Future," in *Education: A Time for Decisions,* eds. Arthur Harkins and Kathleen Redd (Washington, D.C.: World Future Society, 1980).
35. Herbert Read, quoted in Goodman, *The Culture of Childhood,* title page.
36. Mead, *Culture and Commitment,* pp. 94-95.
37. Cobb, *Ecology of Imagination.*
38. Masini, "Women and Children," p. 204.
39. See also Joseph Chilton Pearce, *Magical Child* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977); John C. Lilly, *The Center of the Cyclone* (New York: Julian Press, 1972).
40. See, e.g., Piaget's work as interpreted by Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Opper, *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969); Elkind, *A Sympathetic Understanding;* Coleman, *Youth.* (It is interesting to note that these traits are most commonly described as representative of an immature stage to be transcended, rather than as a potential source of innovation and energy for social reform.)
41. See, e.g., Helen Schwartzman, *Transformations: The Anthropology of Children's Play* (New York: Plenum Press, 1978); Montagu, *Growing Young;* Dobbert and Cooke, "Biological Foundations of Education."

42. Boulding, *Children's Rights*, p. 15.
43. Lorenzo, "Emerging Utopian Sensibility," and "Children as Catalysts of Another Development," *Network for Environment and Development* 3 (March 1976): 4-6; Simon Nicholson, "Multimilieu Project 2000" (unpublished project description available through the Oxford Research Unit, United Kingdom Open University).
44. Lorenzo, "Emerging Utopian Sensibility", p. 12.
45. Kurth-Schai, "Reflections from the Hearts."
46. Maruyama, "Toward Human Futuristics."
47. Anne Parke Pareluis and Robert J. Pareluis, *The Sociology of Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978).
48. Jantsch and Waddington, *Evolution and Consciousness*, p. 7.
49. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child.*
50. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).
51. Maruyama, "Toward Human Futuristics."
52. This issue is of particular importance in light of current research that suggests that teacher-directed approaches to education may impede rather than enhance the learning process because they fail to acknowledge (a) the biologically determined self-organizing nature of children's learning [e.g., Alison Stallibrass, *The Self-Respecting Child: A Study of Children's Play and Development* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974); L. Joseph Stone, Henrietta Smith, and Lois Murphy, *The Competent Infant: Research and Commentary* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Dobbert and Cooke, "Biological Foundations", Merlin C. Wittrock, "Learning and the Brain," in *The Brain and Psychology*, ed. Merlin C. Wittrock (New York: Academic Press, 1980)] and (b) the extent to which students' experience of course content, instructional methods, and classroom procedures and interactions vary depending on a complex array of variables that are psychological [e.g., cognitive styles and motivational patterns - Herman A. Witkin and Donald R. Goodenough, *Cognitive Styles, Essence and Origins* (New York: International University Press, 1981); Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, *Teaching Students through Their Individual Learning Styles* (Reston, VA: Reston, 1978); Samuel Messick, *Individuality in Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1976); Nathan Kogan, "Educational Implications of Cognitive Styles," in *Psychology and Educational Practice*, ed. Gerald S. Lester (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1971), pp. 242-292; David C. McClelland, "Toward a Theory of Motive Acquisition," *American Psychologist* 20 (March/April 1965): 321-333; Joann W. Atkinson and J.O. Raynor, *Personality, Motivation, and Achievement* (Washington, D.C.: Hemisphere, 1978)]; sociocultural [e.g., gender, class, and race issues - Belenky, et. al., *Women's Ways;* Dale Spender, *Invisible Women: The Schooling Scandal* (London: Writers and Readers, 1982); Frances Maher and Kathleen Dunn," *The Practice of Feminist Teaching: A Case Study of Interactions among Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Female Cognitive Development*" (Working Paper No. 144, Wellesley College, Center for Research on Women, 1984)]; and neurological [e.g., hemispheric specialization, growth spurts during brain development, —Wittrock, "Learning and the Brain," Jeanne S. Chall and Allan F. Mirsky, ed., *Education and the Brain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978)].
53. See Michelle Geslin Small, "Education for a Systems Age," (Doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1983).
54. See, e.g., David W. Johnson and Roger T. Johnson, *Learning Together and Alone* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975); Robert E. Slavin, *Cooperative Learning* (New York: Longman, 1983); Nancy Schniedewind, "Cooperatively

Structured Learning: Implications for Feminist Pedagogy," *Journal of Thought* 20 (Fall 1985): 74-87.

55. Positive theoretical and practical implications are discussed by Maruyama, "Toward Human Futuristics;" David T. Moore, "Discovering the Pedagogy of Experience," *Harvard Educational Review* 51 (May 1981): 266-300; Eliot Wigginton, *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985); Simon Nicholson and Raymond Lorenzo, "The Political Implications of Child Participation: Steps toward a Participatory Society," *International Foundation for Development Alternatives* (March/April, 1981): 7-11 [Nyon, Switzerland].
56. Similar thoughts are expressed by Coleman, *Youth*, pp. 163-167.
57. Recommendations for educational reform advocated in the cited national reports (Reference 1) reflect those historically associated with conservative schools of educational thought. Based upon a traditionalist perspective, the primary purposes of education are to teach basic academic skills, to transmit traditional knowledge and values, and to preserve the social order (political and economic status quo). It is not the author's intention to imply that such issues are unimportant but rather to suggest that continued emphasis on these, to the exclusion of the recommendations proposed in the final section of this essay, would be inappropriate in light of emergent social and educational imperatives.
58. Immanuel Kant, *Kant on Education*, translated by Annette Churton (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1900), p. 14; George S. Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (New York: John Day, 1932); Theodore Brameld, *Education as Power* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), and *Education for the Emerging Age* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965).
59. Bruner, *Actual Minds*, p. 149.