

Integration, Equality, and the Backlash Against Racial Justice Education: Comments on Stitzlein, Glass, and Fraser-Burgess

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I am very pleased and honored by my commentators' thoughtful and insightful comments on my co-authored (with Zoë Burkholder) book, *Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education*. In my limited space, I cannot of course reply to all of their comments, but will pick out some important themes.

HOW DESEGREGATION DID NOT WORK

Sheron's title and a main theme in her comments are that desegregation did not work, but also that it was not sufficiently tried. This is a very important observation. In the book, Zoë and I try to distinguish two different ways that desegregation did not work. One was that racially different populations (e.g., Blacks and whites) were not brought together in the same schools to anything like the degree the Supreme Court justices in the *Brown* case envisioned (though the degree of integration was not an official part of their decision). The second was that schooling, nation-wide, was not made equal. We say that integration as changing-the-demographic (which we call "descriptive integration") is often confused with integration-as-equality, so that observers almost believe that the demography and the equality are the same thing.

A central thread in Zoë's and my argument is that the second of these goals — equality of education — is much more important than the first — demographically mixed schools. We argue further — and this is another central message of the book — that, as Ron notes, "unless and until the larger structures of race and class injustice in society as a whole are dismantled, it will be impossible" to bring about equality of education. The political struggle for equal education cannot be focused solely on schools but must ally with struggles for greater equality (with respect to both race and class) in housing, health, occupation, income and wealth. It is impossible for schools to deliver equal outcomes

to students as long as some students are educationally disadvantaged by deficits connected with poverty (e.g., stress, housing instability, inadequate nutrition and health care); and as long as wealthy students and their families can buy educational advantage (e.g., better funded schools, private tutors) for their offspring.

I want to emphasize here that the book sees both the in-school and out-of-school injustices that contribute to unjust educational disparities as being of both a class and a racial nature; the two operate together to disadvantage students of color as a group. The idea of “systemic racism,” which we employ in the book, recognizes that *class*-based processes, like the ability of wealthy families to give their offspring a leg up in educational success, contribute to *racial* disparities — since Blacks, Latinxs, and Indigenous peoples are economically disadvantaged in higher proportions than whites. At the same time, the term “systemic racism” does not explicitly recognize the class element, and that has also contributed to making the class element less visible in discussions of educational justice.

THE “EDUCATIONAL GOODS” CONCEPTION OF EQUALITY OF EDUCATION

On the issue of racial demographics in schools, I appreciate Sarah’s highlighting of the civic aspect of the argument, which is indeed influenced by her own important work on the civic and democratic significance of public education. Sarah recognizes the plurality of goals the book is arguing for — the goal of equality is different from the goal of imparting civic capabilities to students. Equality is the more fundamental goal, as just mentioned, demanded by a conception of educational justice. Zoë and I cash out that “equality” as the provision of an equivalent set of “educational goods” to every student. As my commentators note, we expand that range of goods beyond purely academic or cognitive ones, especially those primarily instrumental to market success, to include moral, civic, and personal flourishing goods. These educational goals have been sidelined in the current neoliberal era.

CIVIC EDUCATION AS AN EDUCATIONAL GOOD

So civic education is one of the educational goods, an intrinsic good to the individual student. But civic education benefits not only the individual student but also the society, because it helps to produce citizens who understand and are motivated to support democracy and pursue the common good for their societies. We argue that that good can best be provided in schools and classes with racially mixed demographics. The co-presence of students from different racial, and ethnoracial, groups facilitates a wider range of experiences contributing to class discussion and learning, greater interest on students' part in the diversity of groups in society, a greater appreciation of the social justice issues affecting the society, and a stronger sense of connection of students to groups other than their own. It supports civic education for a multi-racial democracy. This civic benefit of integration is the most substantial foundation for descriptive integration, and, specifically, superior to the more familiar equality foundation.

Civic education and equality are distinct educational aims. The devising of a robust civic education program does not guarantee that it will be provided to all students equally, nor that the full range of educational goods required by the educational goods conception will be provided equally to all. Our argument is that descriptive integration (integration as racially mixed student demographic) is vital for civic education but, considered only by itself, is only weakly related to equality of education.¹

RAWLS'S "FAIR EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY"

Sheron brings up John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*) and suggests that Rawls provides more resources for its argument than the book recognizes. I think this is a valid criticism but want to clarify our argument's relation to Rawls. We focus on only a limited aspect of Rawls's overall theory of justice, namely his theory of "fair equality of opportunity" (FEO). According to FEO, students' "prospects of success" should not depend on their class background, so it is incumbent on schools and the society more generally to ensure that every student has an equal chance at success, constrained only by their talent and effort, not their family circumstances. Sheron notes that our discussion of poverty as a significant hindrance to that equal opportunity illustrates Rawls's point.

We are very sympathetic to this aspect of FEO, which implicitly condemns the vast inequities in society that stand in the way of genuine equality of educational opportunity. In this regard, we favorably contrast FEO with what we call “the American conception” of equal opportunity, which makes the false assumption that the current system of schooling in our society *actually realizes* equality of opportunity.

But we are critical of two other aspects of FEO. One is that it leaves society’s extremely unequal and unjust reward system uncriticized and implies that equality of opportunity in schooling should be cashed out as an equal opportunity to achieve vastly, and unjust, unequal rewards. Sheron suggests that Rawls’s more general theory of justice could be brought in to critique that reward system, which is certainly contrary to his overall principles of distributive justice, especially but not only the “difference principle.” Sheron is entirely right about this and perhaps we should have made that point clear in the book. But Rawls’s explicit discussion of FEO operates with a more restricted notion of “success,” which he never explicitly connects with, nor criticizes in terms of, his theory of distributive justice developed later in the book.²

SHOULD WE GIVE UP ON PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Ron rightly notes that our book looks at educational justice purely in school contexts. He says we “redeem schools.” “[The authors] still hope that schools can offer up to every child the educational goods” that (in our view) constitute the content of equal education. Ron seems to think that the sad history of actual racial inequality in schooling, detailed in the book, should lead us to jettison the overall public school system entirely. Whether our implicit view that the public school system is capable (accompanied by appropriate changes in the outer society) of embodying educational justice should be preferred to Ron’s view cannot be settled only by looking at schooling historically and in the present as we do in the book.

But I would caution that arguments to blow up or do an end run around the public school system have historically, often contrary to their intent, been put to quite reactionary uses. It is well-known that earlier “anti-school” ideologies framed by a Freirean or other liberatory educational ideology have

been appropriated to support home schooling, charter, and voucher movements and initiatives. All of these have resulted in greater inequities in schooling, questionable educational outcomes with respect to students in those systems, and generally results far from the goals of “education for freedom” that Ron seeks in an educational system.

I do want to say, however, that Ron’s own long career as a tireless advocate for and practitioner of the liberatory form of education he promotes in his comments renders him especially well-positioned to encourage a hope that those goals could actually be realized either inside or outside of a traditional public school system. I also note that a distinctive feature of our book, that does dovetail with Ron’s perspective, is to focus on social movements, both of education activism in African American, Indigenous, Asian American, and Latinx communities, and movements for social and economic justice in the present with which we argue more distinctly educational justice movements must ally.

LEGISLATION LIMITING TEACHING ABOUT RACIAL JUSTICE

I want to dwell for a moment on a recent development Sarah calls attention to and Ron mentions. As of June of this year (2022) nearly 40 state legislatures across the country have passed, or are considering, legislation limiting the teaching of what Zoë and I call in the book racial justice education. This development is almost entirely subsequent to our completing the book in summer 2020 and is also almost wholly a product of Republican-controlled legislatures. To analyze the political origins and character of this development would take me too far afield here. But it would be fair to say that our book articulates the need for, and the character of, the very educational program the legislation aims to prevent or severely constrain. In this sense the book turns out to be a timely intervention in current controversies, and I hope it will help to provide parent, teacher, and progressive educational groups with a way of thinking about education, and especially civic education, that they can use to oppose these legislative initiatives, and to work around them where they are in place. As of this writing, there has not yet been a concerted, national or multi-state-based response to this development, which poses a serious threat to any

coherent program of civic and historical education, and more generally to the core purposes of public schooling. The “anti-CRT” campaign, as it has been dubbed, is indeed also an attack on the professional integrity of the teaching profession.³ And one hopes that opposition to this campaign will develop in the ’22-’23 school year, the first year that much of the legislation will be implemented. Zoë and I hope that teachers, administrators and parents who read our book will recognize in it resources for waging that battle for the soul of public education.

Sarah is right to frame the “anti-CRT” campaigns as a backlash against significant strides that had been made prior to 2021 in bringing race and racial justice into a more prominent role in K-12 education in the US. Zoë and I noted some of those hopeful developments. And indeed in the midst of this backlash, some states are heading further in the direction the book advocates, with more African American history, ethnic history more generally, a recognition of the way racial inequality is baked into US history and current social structures, and attention to movements that have challenged these injustices and sought a more racially just society.⁴ The basic reason there are so many more “backlash states” than progressive ones is that Republicans control state legislatures in so many more states than Democrats do.⁵

TEACHING ABOUT PAST AND PRESENT INJUSTICES

The backlash/anti-CRT legislation varies a bit from state to state but is all aimed at preventing students from learning that racial inequality is an important aspect of American history and life. Most of the legislatures draw on a memo generated by the Trump administration in September 2020, listing what it calls “divisive concepts” that the memo says should not be taught in schools. An illuminating example is the seventh item on that list, “An individual, by virtue of his or her race and sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of his or her race or sex.”⁶ Taken literally, almost no teacher would teach this statement. They do not teach that a current white student is personally responsible for something that happened before they were born.

However, a teacher might teach that current white people benefit from

a legacy of structures in the past created by their white ancestors, and that they have some *current* responsibility to come to grips with those *current* racial injustices. (As Sarah notes, our book does discuss the difference between blame and responsibility, in the context of a discussion of reparations, that would help in this conversation). A teacher teaching this idea could defend themselves against the charge that they are teaching that the student is personally responsible for past injustices.

However, the drafters of the legislation well know that many administrators and parents will not recognize the distinction between responsibility for causing a past harm and responsibility to address present harms that are a legacy of those past harms, and might well complain about a teacher teaching the idea that their students should think about their responsibility to deal with current injustices that are, partly, legacies of past oppression and discrimination as if they were teaching that the students are responsible for having produced that history. And many teachers, entirely aware of this potential dynamic, and concerned for their jobs, would avoid engaging the topic in question. More generally, teachers are likely to be discouraged from venturing into the general race territory that the seventh item illustrates.⁷ This effect, seriously diminishing truthful education about racial injustice, is precisely the one sought by the legislators.

SHOULD STUDENTS EVER FEEL GUILT OR DISCOMFORT CAUSED BY WHAT THEY ARE LEARNING?

Some states focus their restrictions on what effect on students teachers must avoid, such as the eighth item: “An individual should not feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” Does this mean the teacher cannot teach about slavery or contemporary racism because to call attention to those injustices might make some white students in the class feel discomfort, or even guilt? In contrast to the seventh item, I do not see how any teacher could agree to this as a pedagogical principle. On a more general level, it is impossible to teach literature, history, or social studies without students having some of those responses. Sometimes if a student does not experience something like guilt, or at least shame, at something

their society is doing, or even has done in the past, they are not paying sufficient attention to what they are learning.

If the anti-CRT advocate replies, “I am only saying the student should not be exposed to material that might occasion those reactions *on account of race, or gender,*” this then seems entirely arbitrary. If we admit that it sometimes facilitates learning for students to feel discomfort, guilt, and even anguish, what can be a reason for saying race should never be a basis for such reactions?

It is worth noting that the language of the eighth item could be taken to caution teachers about how to present material that might be harmful to the sensibilities of students of color, especially in contexts where they are a minority (as in many integrated schools). It is noteworthy that the “conservatives” behind this legislation have generally not in the past shown this sort of concern for students of colors’ feelings. As we point out in the book, students of color may well be made uncomfortable or experience “anguish” at the presentation of American history encouraged and sometimes mandated by this legislation that they experience as minimizing the suffering and injustices of their ancestors. This just shows how the proponents of the legislation in question are concerned primarily about white students’ sensitivities, and how they will not admit this.

MICHAEL MERRY’S CRITICISMS OF INTEGRATION

Sarah mentions criticisms of integration lodged by Michael Merry and William New. I am familiar only with Merry, who criticized our book at a conference in 2021. Merry is an American philosopher of education based in the Netherlands.⁸ He makes the point that when students of color are the minority in an integrated school, they may not be comfortable there, and, as Sarah notes, the classroom power dynamics might not be healthy for them. Merry is also, rightly, critical of integration as often a merely tokenistic way of making white students and families feel good about the “diversity” in their schools, without really changing their ways of thinking and acting required by a robust, civic conception of integration. I also very much agree with Merry that minority-dominant schools can realize genuine human and educational goods, a point Zoë and I emphasize in the book as part of our discussion of “egalitarian pluralism,” the view (an early and influential version of which W.E.B. DuBois

articulated, for example, in *Souls of Black Folks*) that seeks equality and affirmation of the minority racial group's heritage and sense of community, but not solely within an integrated framework. I also agree with Merry that liberals are generally so wedded to integration that they often fail to see, and cannot even conceive of, values outside of it.

Nevertheless, where I decisively disagree with Merry is his giving short shrift to the civic concerns that pull for integrated schools, and his overly pessimistic dismissal of attempts at multi-racial civic education, thus missing or rejecting the force of the civic argument for integration.

1 Descriptively integrated schools are generally better resourced than minority-dominant schools. If those schools provide a superior education to students of color, it is largely the resources that are having that effect, not the demographic itself. (This is a major argument thread of the book.)

2 Our second criticism of FEO is that it operates with a conception of “native talent” that has been discredited in educational thinking, and that supports class and race hierarchies in society (See chapter 3, 100-102).

3 “CRT” or “Critical Race Theory” is often the explicit target of this legislation, and “CRT” has taken on the role of the single label under which opponents of racial justice education express their opposition. It would take me too far afield, and is not really germane to the issue at hand, to discuss whether that label is totally or only partially misleading. A more common explicit target is the 1619 Project, an initiative led by Nikole Hannah-Jones at the *New York Times* to show, and to produce classroom material to the effect that, slavery should be recognized as foundational to the US socio-economic-political order in light of its history. (A book version of the 1619 Project topped the *NYT* best-seller lists for many weeks in 2022). Much of the legislation explicitly prohibits the use of material connected with the 1619 Project, making clear the McCarthyite character of the “anti-CRT” movement.

4 For example, In December 2020, Connecticut became the first state to require that all high schools offer African American Studies and Latino Studies

starting in 2022. On this and both the more general anti-anti-CRT development and the anti-CRT initiatives, see Catherine Stout and Thomas Wilburn, “CRT Map: Efforts to restrict teaching racism and bias have multiplied across the U.S.,” *Chalkbeat*, Feb. 1, 2022.

5 This is not to say that every Democratic-controlled legislature is headed in a progressive direction, only that, by far, the ones that are are Democrat-controlled.

6 The wording of the Trump memo is reproduced in Sarah Schwartz, “Who’s Really Driving Critical Race Theory Legislation? An Investigation,” *EdWeek*, July 19, 2021, www.edweek.org/policy-politics/whos-really-driving-critical-race-theory-legislation.

7A teacher from New Hampshire expresses this development: “She used to teach her students about racial economic disparities via lessons on Jim Crow laws, redlining and other topics. However, following the passage of a bill that included anti-critical race theory provisions in June of last year, she stopped including those subjects in her curriculum. ‘The law is really, really vague,’ she told *The Washington Post* this year, continuing, ‘We asked for clarification from the state, from the union, from school lawyers. The universal response is no one’s really sure.’” Theodore R. Johnson, Emelia Gold and Ashley Zhao, How Anti-Critical Race Theory Bills Are Taking Aim At Teachers, *FiveThirtyEight*, May 9, 2022.

8 My account of Merry is drawn from his *Equality, Citizenship, and Separation: A Defense of Separation* (London: Palgrave/MacMillan, 2013), which I hope and assume contains the same analysis as the 2014 article Sarah cites.