Author Meets Critics Symposium on Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder

Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education

School Integration and Equity in an Era of Divisive Concepts Legislation

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In this valuable book, Larry Blum and Zoë Burkholder demonstrate that, while integration cannot achieve full educational equality, as some have optimistically believed, integration is an important component of civic education and working toward justice. They build a case for what they call "egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism" as key to achieving greater equality in our nation's K-12 schools. This approach strives to ensure that all students possess the educational goods needed to flourish personally and civically within an integrated setting that values racial harmony and affirms differences.

STARTING WITH HISTORY

While my main focus in this essay will be on the philosophical grounding for this argument, which appears in the second half of the book written primarily by Blum. The authors piece together this argument by beginning with historical accounts of segregation and desegregation. Too rarely do philosophers of education carefully ground their arguments in history, especially directly in the voices and experiences of minoritized populations. But, the authors achieve this well by building on the historical accounts presented by Burkholder.

The opening historical chapters complicate the aim of educational equality and assumptions that integration is the best way to achieve that goal. These chapters nicely emphasize the voices and visions of people long-excluded from full participation in public schools, telling some stories that are still largely unknown, even by many scholars of education. They highlight the experiences of communities of color, drawing special attention to how leaders within those communities understood educational equality and integration, how they resisted ongoing efforts to separate students and provide subpar resources and

opportunities to children in their communities, and how they envisioned and worked toward alternatives. They describe the exclusion of people of color overtly during legal segregation and more covertly after *Brown* through school practices such as tracking and technical and career education programs. The accounts remind all of us, especially white readers, not to be falsely comforted by thinking the work is done because segregation is no longer law or because some children of color seem to be thriving in largely white schools. They also expose white resistance to integration and opposition to equity initiatives.

The histories provided demonstrate that progress that has been made often resulted from the efforts and activism of people of color themselves. Some of those leaders saw integration as one potential pathway to greater equality in schools, but not the only one. Alternatively, some called for self-determination in schools led and populated by members of their own communities. In doing so, these leaders engaged in a values trade-off where some values (perhaps affirmation of their distinct identity or self-protection) are weighted more heavily than the values related to integration, especially when integration may entail assimilation or neutralism regarding identity groups. This "egalitarian pluralism" affirms ethnoracial identities alongside a commitment to educational equality yet recognizes that integration may be useful but is not necessary for achieving those aims. This viewpoint, perhaps best captured in the early arguments of W.E.B. DuBois for separate and distinct experiences and more recently in the work of Tommie Shelby, is elevated from the sidelines by Blum and Burkholder.[1] They employ it later in the book as a foil to evaluate arguments for integration. Ultimately, though, they only endorse it to an extent. They support the spirit of egalitarian pluralism for affirming ethnoracial difference yet stop at recommending stronger forms of separate community-controlled schools because those single identity group schools do not provide the diverse settings needed to sufficiently prepare for civic life.

MOVING INTO PHILOSOPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF EQUALITY AND INTEGRATION

The second, more philosophical, half of the book, written primarily by Blum, makes a case for egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism by first defining

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equality (chapter three) and integration (chapter four). Typically, educational equality is described in terms of equal opportunity. But the authors reveal how, too often, this opportunity framework is narrowly framed as instrumental for navigating neoliberal competition and achieving personal financial success. As a result, systems of injustice are left in place and students are unprepared to confront them. The authors also show how the alternative aim of equal outcomes too often views outcomes as mere test scores, and equal inputs are too often reduced to physical resources. So, instead, Blum and Burkholder redirect attention to equalizing what they call "educational goods."

Following on the heels of other philosophers, such as Harry Brighouse, who have offered a similar focus, they define educational goods as intellectual, personal growth, moral, and civic capacities that have intrinsic value but also can be used instrumentally to improve oneself and society.[2] In our accountability era, schools are problematically evaluated solely in terms of their ability to impart academic knowledge and skills. This fails to acknowledge the other three valuable categories that the authors wisely emphasize. And, notably, the moral and civic components enable students to develop a sense of justice — an understanding, spirit, and motivation that may be necessary for producing graduates who work to overcome significant problems in society and work to achieve equality on multiple fronts.

The authors argue that all students should be "brought to the threshold of possessing the full range of educational goods."[3] I appreciate that they help us identify what, specifically, should be equalized through their list of goods. They also wisely recognize that these cannot be fully equalized, but rather can be held to a minimum threshold. This resonates with Amy Gutmann's "democratic threshold principle," where educational opportunities can be unequally distributed as long as no child is deprived of the opportunity to learn to be a citizen.[4] But, it was this talk of "possession" that gave me pause.

While they confess in a footnote that they "reluctantly use 'possession,'" this reluctance seems to stem mostly from "possession" connoting some distinct object, separate from the learner.[5] While I share that concern, I am more worried about the passive nature of possessing something: you have it, you hold it, but

you don't necessarily *do* anything with it. While they refer to "accessing" the goods, their language doesn't clarify the robust ways in which students should demonstrate an ability to and proclivity for enacting and engaging those goods.[6] So, while their vision of educational equality via equalizing educational goods helpfully suggests that schools cannot just offer opportunities, but instead must make sure they are received, I want to go further in emphasizing the disposition and ability to actively employ these goods. "Possession" stops short of ensuring graduates are equipped, practiced, and habitualized to being civic actors.[7] As a result of merely possessing educational goods, we may not overcome the civic achievement gap. For, while all schools may meet the threshold level, some, likely more privileged schools, will cultivate these goods as more active dispositions which are readily and comfortably employed by graduates.[8] I find myself more attracted to Brighouse and colleagues who describe "being able to engage" educational goods.[9] Even more, I am persuaded by Danielle Allen, who depicts "participatory readiness," where students are ready for civic agency, which she fleshes out as an action-based effort to co-create life in a democracy through effective deliberation, pursuing one's passions, persuading others about their values, and critiquing government.[10]

In chapters four and five, the authors lay out common understandings of what integration means and five arguments for why integration is valuable, especially in terms of achieving educational and racial equality. Given the multiple understandings of "integration," they broaden the term to "integrations," as reflected in the book's title. They set a higher standard when defining integration, going beyond just legally permitting or even ensuring diverse enrollment in schools, to ensuring "ideal integration," where school communities value students' identities and racial harmony. They trace this definition to the egalitarian pluralism fought for by activists described in the opening chapters and the spirit of affirmation embodied in leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr.

The authors helpfully reveal shortcomings of the two most common arguments for integration where integration is believed to provide access to physical and educational resources for students of color and to the human and cultural capital of white families and students. These arguments problematically

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uphold white culture as superior,[11] diminish the contributions of people of color to school communities,[12] undermine mutual respect,[13] and fail to embody a justice perspective.[14] The authors touch only briefly on two other arguments for integration — that integration better prepares graduates for a diverse workforce and provides intellectual benefits — before focusing on the argument they find most convincing: civic benefits.

Blum and Burkholder contend that integration develops civic knowledge and capability which can be used to serve individuals and improve society, thereby working toward not just educational equality, but also racial equality and justice overall. I found myself persuaded by the case they present, but it was one that I believe would be even stronger if they incorporated the only briefly mentioned intellectual benefits argument into their civic argument. Insofar as civic life largely entails civic reasoning and discourse centered on answering "what should we do?" about a host of shared problems, bringing an array of worldviews, experiences, and ideas to the table is key to finding informed and satisfactory solutions.[15] This epistemic diversity is best fostered in integrated settings. Moreover, schools can nurture the skills needed to shift through those competing views, so students learn how to wisely consider and contrast them in respectful ways. Nonetheless, I appreciate that their civic justification for integration foregrounds the civic purpose of education, which has increasingly been overlooked in the midst of a growing neoliberal focus on individualism, competition, and marketplace success.

RELATIONSHIPS AND AIMS

Discussing the longstanding purpose of schooling as educating for democracy brings me to some confusion I had throughout the book regarding the relationship between strategies and goals, means and ends. The authors contend that integration was originally seen by many as a key strategy for achieving educational equality.[16] In fact, they claim, in what I believe is an overreading of the *Brown* decision, that the Court believed "equality of education could be achieved solely through such school-based processes, namely school integration."[17]

Throughout the book, the authors reiterate that educational equality

cannot be achieved until structures of race and class injustice are dismantled.[18] I suspect that they are right, and yet this situation feels a bit like a chicken-or-the-egg problem. Even while we may not be able to achieve full educational equality in or through schools, articulating the goal as the authors do is a worthwhile contribution and may help guide schools and their graduates toward alleviating some of the larger injustices. Namely, this entails recognizing that not only are integration and educational equality only weakly linked empirically, philosophical arguments for mere legal or descriptive integration that are still common today are insufficient for achieving educational equality.

Along the way, however, the authors shift from talking about the goal of educational equality to advocating for egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism as the best form of integration to "pursue racial equality," the aim also highlighted in the book's title.[19] And, in one place, they argue that we have to equally distribute educational goods in order to achieve educational justice, without sufficiently explaining how that justice is related to racial or educational equality.[20] While they do distinguish racial equality as a moral principle of justice separate from the more general educational equality, and while they locate the moral urgency of addressing racial equality within the history of education activism around segregation, their mixing of these aims muddies the discussion. Moreover, while I don't personally feel this way, their compiling of aims may put more onus on schools to solve the larger social, political, and economic problems than they should be fairly held responsible for or is reasonable given their starting point of saying that schools are limited by larger systems of injustice.

To sift through this confusion, I want to draw attention to their claim that ideal integration is a civic good in itself, rather than a mere strategy for achieving educational equality because it helps differing people learn to respectfully work together on matters of the common good.[21] This prepares students for democracy and is a value they see as "distinct from equality."[22] I agree with the authors, and I suspect that many who endorse integration as a mere strategy toward educational equality could rather easily also be persuaded to do so. Nonetheless, I appreciate how their focus highlights the increasingly underappreciated connection between schools and democracy.

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I am also reminded here of Dewey's claim that if our end is educating for democracy, then our means must also embody democracy in action.[23] Without using these terms or a Deweyan lens, the authors show how the resources and capital arguments for integration as a means to achieve educational equality aren't actually aligned with democratic equality because they maintain systems of injustice or value some groups over others. So, instead, they offer egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism as a means that is better aligned with the end of equality — political, educational, and racial. Along with that approach, they helpfully shed light on some of the particular curricular and pedagogical approaches we might employ, including detracking, expanding social-emotional learning, and increasing teaching about race.

The authors call attention to the growing role of social-emotional learning, which, perhaps in its efforts to appear politically neutral, omits skills that are distinctly civic (a stance that will likely be further entrenched as outspoken critics increasingly align social-emotional learning with Leftist indoctrination).[24] Emphasizing those skills highlights how social-emotional learning helps not just individual learners, but offers benefits to society also. Blum and Burkholder also briefly discuss civic education, tasking it with teaching knowledge of racial injustice ("civic literacy about race") and instilling the motivation in students to alleviate such racial injustice. Most traditional civics curricula focus on civic content (democratic institutions, processes, and laws) and likely would not engage these aims beyond equipping students with basic historical knowledge of racial groups and historical events.[25] The call issued by Blum and Burkholder better prepares students for the non-ideal world in which they live, rather than an ideal account of democracy, typical in civics education, that lacks racial strife. They go on to describe the need to foster a civic commitment to "engaging in actions to promote public good and civic ideals."[26] This goes beyond the sorts of knowledge, skills, and dispositions typically endorsed in civics education. I caution that this may infringe on values pluralism where some citizens may choose not to engage such a commitment at all and others, Libertarians perhaps, would privilege pursuing their own self interests.

In the end, if I understand the chain of relationships and aims correctly,

they claim ideal integration is important because it supports and facilitates civic and moral education, and that form of education best produces graduates who are prepared for democracy and can understand and work toward justice, which entails both racial and educational equality.[27]

POTENTIAL PUSHBACK

As you can tell, I am largely in support of their project, but I sense a worrisome political tide that may suggest larger, or at least more vocal, audiences would likely would not be. I am referring to the proponents of anti-critical race theory legislation, often called "divisive concepts" bills introduced in dozens of states. These bills forbid teaching about systemic racism, key terms related to racism such as white supremacy, or even teaching the idea that racism is an ongoing phenomenon on a large scale. For example, in proposed legislation in my state of Ohio, "divisive concepts" include teaching that the "United States is fundamentally racist" or "assigning fault, blame, or bias to a nationality, color, ethnicity, race, or sex."[28]

While I agree with the authors that "To teach, or to leave students with the impression, that it is an open question whether American society today is a just social order is not intellectually or civically responsible," the fact that these matters are being taken up in legislation at such a scale across the country suggests they may now fall under the category of "open" controversies. I borrow this definition from Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy, who say that one criteria for determining whether an issue is open is political authenticity, which can be demonstrated by a topic openly being debated in widespread legislation.[29] And, while the authors are correct that "Incorporating the history of racial injustice into secondary school curricula…should not be controversial," it, unfortunately, is today.[30] In part, advocates of these bills are concerned that such teaching induces feelings of guilt within and encourages blame toward white people.[31] The authors anticipate some of the potential backlash and try to head it off by helpfully distinguishing being responsible for a situation from being blameworthy for it, and by sharing pedagogical approaches for preventing, or at least working through, guilt.[32] Relatedly, while the authors suggest that schools and

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districts can begin by issuing equity statements, it was telling that, in my home state of Ohio, the State Board of Education was forced to rescind their equity statement when it was found to be out of line with the beliefs of many voters regarding matters of race in schools.[33]

I also am concerned that some of the authors' assumptions and the recommendations they derive from them may not jive with significant populations today. For example, they assert, "The purpose of education…is, therefore, to provide students with the ability to form values of their own, which they recognize may not align with dominant sociocultural values at a given time."[34] It seems that some proponents of more traditional civic education would argue that schools should be inculcating specific American values, commitments, and ways of life. Additionally, midway into the book, they acknowledge that some teachers feel it is not their responsibility to address larger injustices or to take political action to alleviate poverty. I felt they did not satisfactorily respond to this position by providing a case that teachers are not just "well-positioned" to take up these matters, as they note, but actually have a responsibility to do so.[35] This position is exacerbated by blowback teachers are experiencing on the heels of the teacher demonstrations and strikes the book celebrates. Some argue this is evidenced by the divisive concept bills which will further police what teachers do in their classrooms and seek to keep teachers in their lane by seemingly enforcing apolitical teaching. To insist that teachers have a responsibility to take politically risky activism against racism and poverty right now seems to warrant a longer and more convincing discussion than that currently provided.

Finally, I'm not sure how Blum and Burkholder might respond to naysayers like William New and Michael Merry, who believe that integration and related efforts to diversify schools are not only unnecessary for achieving justice but may actually introduce more harm to students of color.[36] I would be intrigued to hear more from the authors about how to head off the problems of tokenism and imbalances of power within classroom dynamics across racial lines that trouble New and Merry.

I suspect that if written today, the brief sections dealing with these sorts of pushbacks would need to be much more robust in light of rapidly

shifting cultural views on the heels of divisive concepts legislation and contested school board elections. As they currently stand, however, they likely would not sufficiently persuade advocates of such legislation or those who hold some differing views regarding some of the assumptions and recommendations of the authors. I hope that the authors will continue to write overtly in response to such legislation and competing ideologies. I believe that they can offer helpful pathways forward. Within that endeavor, this book is a fantastic first step in helping us rethink the role of integration in achieving larger forms of equality and in foregrounding the civic purposes of education.

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1 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; rprt, New York, NY: Dover Publications, 2016); Tommie Shelby, *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018), 67-76.

2 Harry Brighouse, Helen F. Ladd, Susanna Loeb, and Adam Swift, *Educational Goods: Values, Evidence, and Decision-Making* (University of Chicago Press, 2018).

3 Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder, *Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2022), 95.

4 Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

5 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations,* 227 fn 4.

6 Blum and Burkholder*,* 105.

7 This more active sense of habits of democracy and citizenship run throughout my work, including: Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2020); Sarah M. Stitzlein *American Public Education and the Responsibility of its Citizens: Supporting Democracy in an Age of Accountability* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and Political Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Breaking Bad Habits of Race and Gender: Transforming Identity in Schools* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2008); Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Habits of Democracy: A Deweyan Approach to Citizenship Education in America Today," *Education & Culture* 30, no. 2 (2014): 61-86.

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8 Meira Levinson, *No Citizen Left Behind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

9 Brighouse, *Educational Goods*, 25.

10 Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

11 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 134.

12 Blum and Burkholder, 142.

13 Blum and Burkholder, 142,

14 Blum and Burkholder, 144.

15 Sarah M. Stitzlein, "Defining and Implementing Civic Reasoning and Discourse: Philosophical and Moral Foundations for Research and Practice," in *Educating for Civic Reasoning & Discourse*, eds. Carol D. Lee, Gregory White, and Dian Dong (National Academy of Education, 2021), https://naeducation.org/civic-reasoning-and-discourse/.

16 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 94.

17 Blum and Burkholder, 129.

18 This appears as early as page 4 and as late as page 184 in Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*.

19 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 12, 122, 129.

20 Blum and Burkholder, 168.

21 Blum and Burkholder, 94.

22 Blum and Burkholder, 94.

23 John Dewey, *Democracy is Radical* (1976), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

24 A simple internet search turns up many websites linking social-emotional learning with Leftists causes and activism, including: https://thenationalpulse.com/analysis/social-emotional-learning-turning-children-leftist-activists/ ; https://www.edweek.org/education/theres-pushback-to-social-emotional-learning-heres-what-happened-in-one-state/2020/02 ; https://thefederalist.com/2021/02/08/how-socio-emotion-

al-learning-became-another-vehicle-for-anti-white-racism-in-schools/ .

25 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 165.

26 Blum and Burkholder, 166.

27 Blum and Burkholder, 162.

28 H.B.327 Sec.3313.6027.A.1.b, A.3.

29 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 104; Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009); Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

30 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 124.

31 States, like Iowa and Oklahoma, have prohibited teaching "divisive concepts," which cause students to "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress" about their own race/gender, or indoctrinating students (H.F. 802, Sec 2.1.a.8; SB803, Sec.1.A.1.h).

32 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 124-6

33 Anna Staver, "Ohio State Board of Education repeals its anti-racism resolution," *The Columbus Dispatch,* October 14th, 2021,

https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2021/10/14/ohio-state-board-education-repeals-anti-racism-resolution/6094952001/.

34 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 103.

35 Blum and Burkholder, 118.

36 William S. New and Michael Merry, "Is Diversity Necessary for Educational Justice?" *Educational Theory* 64, no. 3 (2014): 205-225.

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