

Author Meets Critics Symposium on Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder
Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education

Before and After School Integrations: Education as a Practice of Freedom

Ronald David Glass
University of California, Santa Cruz

I am grateful for the publication of *Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education*, by Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder. Blum and Burkholder engage history philosophically and deploy history to shape philosophical inquiry. With exceptional analytic clarity, the first two chapters situate the distinctive histories of schooling in relation to the social and educational context of racism for the Black, Native American, Mexican American, and Asian American communities, and thus in relation to their distinctive and “ambivalent” responses to the social, political, and institutional openings that mark the struggle for schooling for a just democracy.¹ Blum’s and Burkholder’s historical analysis yields generative themes that they then use to help forge a compelling argument in the concluding three chapters for democratic public schooling that aims toward an *egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism*. They craft an “educational goods” argument that challenges mainstream conceptions of the value of public schooling and establishes a primacy for the moral, personal, and civic capacity-building aims of public schooling.

I will not take space here to restate the substance and details of their exceptionally well supported exposition (the endnotes alone are superb and fertile sources both bibliographically and conceptually), nor will I engage with the specific elements of the argument as are others in the symposium. Instead, I want to think about the frame of Blum’s and Burkholder’s general argument, and to call our attention toward a form of education that was the imagined force to realize the dream of equality and freedom that motivated BIPOC communities, and indeed had already shaped their critical consciousnesses, a form of education that is itself a praxis of critical engagement with the internal and

external limiting conditions of their humanity.

This conception of education as liberation builds from the insights that human beings read and write the world through their linguistic and practical activity long before they read and write letters and words, and that this meaning-making activity is an ontological capacity that cannot be wholly destroyed while anyone remains alive, regardless of how oppressed they may be by the vicissitudes of their situation, regardless of how constrained they may be by the vast ideological formations and institutional dominance of class, race, gender, and religion. Blum and Burkholder trace their conception of education as liberation to Frederick Douglass, who certainly saw that a “‘direct pathway from slavery to freedom’ was education;”² but I would caution that Douglass understood that this kind of education was not that offered by the dominant and their institutions, and I would encourage a consistent distinction for Blum and Burkholder marking ‘education’ from ‘schooling’ that can then bring the strategic aims about public school integration of the various BIPOC communities into clearer focus. My own reading of Douglass’s autobiography shows that his critical consciousness emerged from his attentive reading of the dominant world of his master and mistress, which enabled him to strategically deploy the racism of his white workmates at the Baltimore shipyards of his slave youth to get them to inadvertently teach him the alphabet, and it was his growing word literacy and capacities to express his humanity and increasingly wide ranging critical understanding that led him to recognize his rapid return to brute existence under the slave-breaker Covey. He restored his critical coherence when he refused to deny his own humanity and he fought Covey, risking his physical life but gaining his freedom regardless of his enslavement. This, I believe, is the education that animates and precedes the struggles for school integrations, and if public schools are ever to achieve aims of an *egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism*, then this must also become the education that comes after school integrations.

Paulo Freire argues that a liberatory education “takes historicity as the starting point” in at least two senses:³ (1) it is the starting point because human beings are just those sorts of beings whose daily lives and consciousnesses are enduringly under construction within the bodies-families-communities-soci-

eties-places/times into which they are born and thrown by circumstance and luck and which they also enduringly reconstruct so need not repeat — the very definition of historicity; (2) it is the starting point because the critically conscious realization of our ineliminable creative power to modify our quotidian practices and thus transform our lives on a historical scale is the focal point of an education that enables human equality and freedom to become manifest. With no need to repeat the past and increasing capacities to live our dreams for the future in the present, we can bend the arc of history toward justice. To put this another way, we can say historicity is the starting point ontologically because our capacity to make meaning, to create and produce culture, that is, to make history, is part of what defines our humanity; and, historicity is the starting point educationally because the awakening to our powers as historical beings — regardless of our place within any ranking and sorting regime of injustice — provides the force required for freedom and equality to become manifest in the long-haul work of social transformation to forge a just democracy.

US schools have never been institutions of such an education, but that is the one sought by every unjustly and inhumanly treated BIPOC community that has contended with public schools, has grappled with the broken promises of inclusions into dominant orders that seem to absorb countless reforms without altering the fundamental hierarchies. This is why it was especially promising that Blum and Burkholder interwove a historical account of how oppressed racialized communities have engaged with the injustices and possibilities of racial segregations/integrations in public schooling, but their philosophical account of what could and should justify the purpose of public schooling I think does not give sufficient weight to these freedom dreams of redressing the miseducation of their communities.

I argue that if we must take seriously the record from colonial schools to the present, which is consistent and unequivocal in its institutionalization and rationalization of a heteropatriarchal Christian racist class order; we must take seriously its near monopoly power on the formation of youth and its deep integration with extended social, cultural, religious, economic, and political institutions. That is why school integration, while serving as a necessary and

strategic intervention at the level of interfering with the legal enforcement of racial segregation (schooling and otherwise), could never be a sufficient strategic intervention at the level of power (social, cultural, economic, political) to achieve equality and freedom. This is why BIPOC communities needed to refine their approach to address their particular histories and ways of being interpolated into the ranking and sorting regimes, and these tactical variations that became incorporated into movements for educational justice were necessary to meet and outmaneuver the interwoven consistency and flexibility in the efforts to sustain white supremacy.

Blum and Burkholder “analyze how race influenced the creation and development of public schools from their formation in the mid-nineteenth century to the present” and then “grapple with what an equal education based on what this history should and could look like” and they also pose the question for their analysis of “what is equal when education is equal,”²⁴ yet in the end, they continue to redeem schools. Even after rightly critiquing a range of conservative and liberal school reforms and discursive framings of the aims of public schooling, after acknowledging that equal opportunity solutions are anemically focused on “marketable skills and competition for reward and omit the distinctly educational value of what is learned in school,”²⁵ they still hope that schools can offer up to every child educational goods “valuable in their own right.”²⁶ These echoes of some of the founding hopes of public schooling have bounced around in my own thinking at times, but I think the time has long past to give up these illusory reassurances.

My reading of the history of schooling from colonial times to the present shows that BIPOC communities always have had dreams of education that they recognized as compromised by schooling; thus, in part, their ambivalence about any form of integration. Leading education historians and scholars have thoroughly documented how more than a century of school reform efforts that have sought not only the various integrations that Blum and Burkholder specify, but various other reforms in the curriculum, teacher preparation and professional development, or modes of assessment — all sought to address diversity, equity, and inclusion, yet nonetheless have left the foundational gram-

mar of schooling intact.⁷ As Blum and Burkholder themselves detail, BIPOC communities have good reason not to trust whites, not only because good numbers of them have openly opposed school integration and racial equity, but also because good numbers of even liberals and progressives also manage to horde privileges for their children and subvert the impacts of the myriad reforms meant to advance equity, let alone blunt or overturn the ongoing reforms by rightist formations meant to reinforce the race, class, and gender status quo. The inequitable competition and ranking and sorting structures of school are integral to both the capital arguments as well as the opportunity arguments that Blum and Burkholder insightfully critique to advance their egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism, and these ranking and sorting regimes remain integral to schools that still imagine themselves rightfully providing a meritocratic place in the hierarchies that shape daily life.

Blum and Burkholder themselves acknowledge that “ultimately we argue that unless and until the larger structures of race and class injustice in society as a whole are dismantled, it will be impossible to achieve both the goal of educational equality and the civic equality for which civic education aims.”⁸ They acknowledge that “Educational justice must ally with class- and race-focused initiatives and activism for economic, health, and housing justice.”⁹

And so I say enough is enough, it is time to recognize that schools have not been and cannot be a key link in these struggles until they become structured within the ongoing practices of liberatory education — within education as a practice of freedom. In the urgency of now, after centuries of unequal schooling and an unjust semi-democratic society, it is time to put children, families and communities first, not the interests of the dominant class, race, and gender orders, and to put first their human needs so that they might then reimagine an institution that serves the aims of the sort that Blum and Burkholder define. This entails not aiming at integrations in any form, but aiming instead to build coalitions committed to abolishing the schooling system integral to the system of racial capitalism and the formation and maintenance of unjust hierarchies of race, gender, class, language, and committed to constructing new ways of raising our children and fostering cooperative communities with the skills and

understandings needed to do the immediate work of responding to and healing ongoing traumas, and the persistent work of expanding the spaces and possibilities for practices that sustain equality and mutual respect among persons.

Perhaps such new institutions will truly be able to take a “social justice perspective on society and education itself” as Blum and Burkholder hope for schools.¹⁰ Perhaps they can embody the form of education as a practice of freedom that Frederick Douglass understood as the grounding of his own humanity and critical consciousness, that way of reading the world that reveals its limits and constraints not as g*d-given or ordained by the power of the whip or the dollar but as human made, woven into the culture of the dominant and the common sense of everyday life. This critical reading of the world becomes more strategic the more deeply it is part of a praxis that rewrites the world, making manifest the knowing and being otherwise that makes freedom dreams of equality and justice real. This is a praxis of struggle both internal and external, internal to reconstruct our conceptions of who/what is worthy of honor and praise including in ourselves, and external to reconstruct the institutional mechanisms and cultural practices that shape our moral and political orders. If public schooling is to have a substantive role in the struggle for racial equality and civic renewal and achieve the aims sought by Blum and Burkholder, then it must be situated within education as a practice of freedom.

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

2 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 15ff, 15.

3 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 1970).

4 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 3.

5 Blum and Burkholder, 10.

6 Blum and Burkholder, 11.

7 (see Tyack and Cuban; see Centennial issue of *Educational Researcher*).

8 Blum and Burkholder, *Integrations*, 4.

9 Blum and Burkholder, 11.

10 Blum and Burkholder, 11.