

Author Meets Critics Symposium on Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder

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

## Resolving the American Dilemma of Racial Inequity in Education that Legal Desegregation Failed to Solve

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Incorporating liberal democracy's axioms of individual freedom and equality with advocacy for economically and racially oppressed groups has been a perennial contention since the establishment of the United States. In the twentieth century one well-known exemplar of this social conflict was associated with the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Supreme Court decision, which ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional. In the ensuing contentious political environment, prominent segregationists, such as George Wallace (1919-1998), declared their unwavering devotion to the Jim Crow separate but equal policy. Like many Black intellectuals and professional elites at the time, Carter G. Woodson (1875-1950) decried segregated Black education, largely advocating for curricula that incorporated history, cultural forms, and achievements of people of African descent in the United States; however, the substandard condition of schools Black students attended relative to those of Whites was a part of his complaint. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, under Thurgood Marshall (1908-1993), founder of its Legal Defense Fund and first director of legal counsel, undertook the decisive national legal strategy to challenge school segregation.

*Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education* is partly a focused historical study of the ethnic and race-based repercussions of the ensuing policy implementations of school integration. It complicates this legal intervention to secure comparable education for African-Americans and other minorities, at a time when there was a clear Black versus White binary of racial identification in the United States. Authors Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder revisit the *Brown v. Board of Education*, historically in chapter one,

“Segregation” and two, “Desegregation,” and, in chapters three through five, philosophically, in reconceiving equal education. Paying particular attention to the second half of the work, this response lauds the text for an aspirational goal for public education that is in principle multicultural, egalitarian, and responsive to evidence of the strong socioeconomic correlates of education equality and social equity. Difficult to square is the relationship of the work to evaluating the 1954 Supreme Court decision, which matters for what readers will take away from the text as a comment on the effectiveness of democratic process in social progress towards racial equality.

All indicators are that *Brown v. Board* has either been ineffective or has been undone as a pathway to racially desegregating public schools. The Southern Poverty Law Center has stated that K-12 students attend schools across the south at an equivalent level of segregation today as prior to the decision.<sup>1</sup> On standardized tests of educational attainment, persisting year over year, Black versus White achievement gaps in brute comparisons of differential performances herald the disparate outcomes of public education almost three quarters of a century later. So, it is not unexpected that the first two chapters of the text offer this premise in its ethnic-based history of the law’s implementation across different ethnicities, and geographic regions, including the west coast and northeastern cities such as Boston. The law has been unable to accomplish its most fundamental aim while introducing hardships for Native Americans and other minoritized racial and ethnic groups.

Whether due to the operational implementation of the legal apparatus or by its theory of change, desegregation fell short of being the tool of modulation that Black, brown and Asian children needed, in their parents’ eyes. In decoupling segregation, which was the law’s clear mandate, and integration, which was its elusive ideal, these chapters recount that to end the former, Black communities lost a generation of skilled teachers who formerly made the most of severely under-resourced schools. In addition, Black children were forced to bear much of the social costs of integrating all-White schools, which typically were far from their home neighborhoods and hostile to their presence. In a similar vein, indigenous children experienced disruptions in their neighborhood

relationship to their schools. Native American families, persistent targets of relocation programs prior to and after the 1954 *Brown* decision, valued self-determination above all in their schooling options. Asian families, who did not necessarily seek assimilation, were forced into school attendance patterns that they did not elect.

Somewhat obscured in this analysis is the power of the 1954 Supreme Court decision as a national symbol and the relationship of social progress to the kinds of retrospectives we undertake in the United States democracy. It is the case that skepticism about the *Brown v. Board* decision had percolated through Black society, from the church to its representatives in the halls of the academy. Derrick Bell, for instance, used the decision to propose *interest convergence* as a tenet of critical race theory.<sup>2</sup> This idea that Black social progress was always at the mercy of White interest calls into question the broad political commitment to Black equality for its own sake. Stories of community loss and political subterfuge accompanying the decision, in these cases, are at least partly a commentary on the workings of the White supremacist mechanisms of power, which typically seek to consolidate influence and stymie Black progress, including destroying the post-bellum embryonic social institutions forming in the communities of Great Migration in west, north and eastern parts of the United States.<sup>3</sup> These perspectives give the lie to the idea that what was most at issue about ending segregation was proximity to White society, a view that segregationists primarily entertained.

While there are clearly the undertones in the Black cultural tradition that a way would have been found, in reflecting on the counterfactual of an alternate ruling, it is an entirely different frame of reference to weigh whether it would have been better to not have tried than to fail in such a spectacular fashion. No more powerful reminder of this meaning can be found than in the testimony, before the United States Senate, of the first African American female Supreme Court justice nominee, Ketanji Brown Jackson. She often shared with the public that her parents gauged social progress based on the contrast between their segregated education and that of their children.

It can also be lost that the goal of the law was to achieve better educa-

tional outcomes for all, including White students. A part of the “sociological jurisprudence” informing Chief Justice Warren’s majority decision was Gunnar Myrdal’s work,<sup>4</sup> *An American Dilemma*, which detailed a perceived moral crisis in Anglo-American society of a dissonance between their stated commitment to an American creed of equal liberty, opportunity, and justice for all.<sup>5</sup> The sociological evidence showing the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes about people of African descent was included in addition to psychologists, Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s research on the negative self-perception about their skin color that Black children entertained. There was deep concern about social and political prospects of a society where members of the dominant racial group exhibited this vast cognitive dissonance between their ideals of human equality and enacting it. To concede this multi-faceted socio-political context, one wonders whether this Supreme Court decision simply should be a sedimented part of American cultural history or an artifact of perfecting the union. In this case, there is not only an acknowledgement of the different perspectives of its genealogy but also shared agreement about it being an irrevocably valuable step, flawed though it may be. The revisionist battles of its retelling would merely be commentary on the unfolding of its complexity and significance in better understanding of the foibles, failures, and the correctives of our union.

The second part of the book argues for a better suited paradigm to address the various issues of persisting inequity or gesturing in the prior section about a lack of consensus regarding the unequivocal value of the law’s implementation. Beginning with chapter three, “Equality,” one problem that the educational good standard addresses is equating the *Brown v. Board* mandates with educational equality, particularly in advancing racial justice. This approach “leaves in place unjust white advantage that must be challenged both inside the school and in the wider society if educational and social justice is to be achieved.”<sup>6</sup> According to this educational goods standard, throughout compulsory K-12 schooling and at its exit, all students should possess certain educational goods. “Their possession of these goods at the exit point should be independent of their backgrounds, such as race or socioeconomic status. This equality is a requirement of educational justice.”<sup>7</sup> The four categories of these

goods, which can be either intrinsic or instrumental, and possessed to varying degrees, are *intellectual or cognitive development*, *personal growth or individual flourishing*, *moral capabilities*, or *attributes*, and *civic agency*. So, while integration has *civic* value in cultivating the habits of mind and relationship for a multiracial/multicultural democracy, it is not inherently continuous with racially equitable education.

The authors contrast the educational goods’ “result” standard as a named “Equal treatment/Equal Care and Respect” principle that touts an “equal treatment” moral ideal for whole systems of education compared with that of equal opportunity in education.<sup>8</sup> The work attributes the flaw of this latter goal to its place in John Rawls’s philosophical articulation of the principles of justice and turns away from his fair educational opportunity (FEO) as an adequate moral rationale for the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision and educational equity, more broadly.<sup>9</sup> Acknowledging that FEO is a particularly American idea, the authors maintain that the practical barriers to fulfillment are not only that students begin at different starting points, but also that there are variable kinds of access to the resources, experiences, and quality curriculum that constitute opportunity. The very idea that education is reducible to traversing a competitive terrain is also objectionable.

There is a case to be made that the text is more sympathetic with Rawls’s FEO than their critique implies. Rawls’s derivation of the principles of justice within a framework of overlapping consensus that leaves intact the comprehensive beliefs of individuals and generates a reasonable pluralism bears some similarity to the “justice framework,” and the form of pluralism derived by the end of the book, *egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism* (ECIP). The socio-economic architecture on which Rawls’s political liberalism is built is that of a capitalism in which education is instrumental. An educational goods standard is also beholden to such a superstructure. Their justice framework posits an axis of inequity that is “*causal or analytical*. . . The second is *normative*. . . The third way the systems are intertwined is *solutionally*.”<sup>10</sup> This axis implicates race, class, singly, and as interlocking factors in social inequities, and gestures to the multiple social dimensions that effective solutions must take into account in meeting the educational goods threshold. A more authentic critique of Raw-

ls would be upfront that they share similar beliefs about the kinds of social arrangements through which these principles actually must navigate in order to enact a just society. In their form of pluralism, the text is putting forward a wholly disruptive paradigm that places inclusion of democratic educational aims in its superstructure as the tool of modulation.

Their resonance with this idea is particularly evident in the extensive discussion of the overwhelming threat that poverty poses to educational equality. Although they do not reference Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory,<sup>11</sup> their identification of FEO's flaws fall within each of the constitutive systems. In the microsystems is the component of children's lives that directly reflect their well-being in families, communities, and schools. The mesosystem is a gauge of these factors in terms of their relationship to each other and the child. In the exosystem are aspects of work, life, and social services that interact with the parent in ways that can negatively and positively affect the child. The macrosystem and chronosystem reference broader social and historical forces at work respectively. Given the scope of educational effects for the learners and society, these examples suggest that Blum and Burkholder position education as foundational to the realization of liberty in all institutions of our political society. The question arises of whether a government or political authority can maintain a "well-ordered" society, particularly one that is multicultural/multi-racial, without first some form of axiomatic status for education or that relates to the areas of human flourishing to which they are relevant. The final two chapters detail arguments for an *egalitarian pluralism*, which equally prioritizes affirming the "ethnoracial group identities, heritages, and experiences" of learners,<sup>12</sup> while not being committed to formal racial integration. For this perspective, the authors credit Du Bois's ideas of an emerging Black identity incipient in cultural forms and histories that his body of work represented. Schooling that did not demand assimilationism would celebrate the distinctiveness of the Black descendants of the enslaved in the United States, thus challenging standard defenses of integration and its potential for educational equity. Ostensibly, egalitarianism should not undermine cultural identity; however, one wonders if this project of Black cultural advancement should be more central rather than an incidental

benefit. Chapter four addresses the flawed reasonings about the demographic ideals and racist assumptions in the idea that social capital flows unidirectionally from White dominant schools to minority dominant ones. Thus, a multiplicity of minority dominant schools may flourish if they abide by the educational goods standard.

While denying that some form of institutional separation and distinctness among the races/ethnicities in education is inherently unequal as was the premise of the 1954 *Brown* decision, egalitarian pluralism expresses the hopes of a version of the American identity in which these identities can be affirmed.<sup>13</sup> Chapter five posits the civic educational goods justification for integration while taking to task defenses that rest solely on arguments of presumed cognitive benefits or promoting a diverse workplace, which the authors maintain all may remain open questions for lack of evidence; nevertheless, “workplace interracial comfort and the intellectual benefits of ethnoracial diversity do appear to be reasonable arguments in favor of integrated K-12 classrooms and schools.”<sup>14</sup>

In concluding the text, the authors underscore the benefits of an *egalitarian civic integrationist pluralism* (ECIP) over the prevailing conceptions that are merely “descriptive integrations.”<sup>15</sup> In a racially unjust society the latter approach has proven to be unsurprisingly impotent given its interlocking manifestations in poverty. The *civic* purpose of education in cultivating an engaged citizenry acts as a norm with the educational goods standards being the definition of equality. Returning to Myrdal and the *American Dilemma*, one wonders whether the text has struck a proper balance between the racist forces in our history and the aspirations of our founding documents.

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1 Brad Bennett, *Southern Poverty Law Center*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.splcenter.org/news/2020/05/16/weekend-read-66-years-after-brown-v-board-schools-across-south-still-separate-and-unequal>.

2 Derrick A. Bell, “Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (1980): 518–533. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546>.

3 Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide* (Lon-

don, UK: Bloomsbury, 2016).

4 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publisher, 1962).

5 David Southern, *Gunnar Myrdal and Black-White relations: The use and abuse of an American Dilemma 1944-1969* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

6 Lawrence Blum and Zoë Burkholder, *Integrations: The Struggle for Racial Equality and Civic Renewal in Public Education* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 94.

7 Blum & Burkholder, *Integrations*, 95.

8 Blum & Burkholder, 97.

9 John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

10 Blum & Burkholder, *Integrations*, 108.

11 Urie Bronfenbrenner, *Ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

12 Blum & Burkholder, *Integrations*, 154.

13 Blum & Burkholder, 154.

14 Blum & Burkholder, 162.

15 Blum & Burkholder, 180.