

From the Diffusion of Knowledge to the  
Cultivation of Agency:  
A Short History of Civic Education Policy  
and Practice in the United States

Nancy Beadie, *University of Washington*  
Zoë Burkholder, *Montclair State University*

With the Assistance of:  
James D. Anderson, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*  
Andrew Hartman, *Illinois State University*  
Walter C. Parker, *University of Washington*  
Rowan Steineker, *Florida Gulf Coast University*

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Necessity of Civic Education

Civic education is a necessity of life. It is at least as important as education in science and technology, or literacy in language and math. As the climate crisis, the ongoing crisis of police brutality, and the recent global pandemic make plain, scientific knowledge and humanist understanding may improve and enrich human life, but they are not enough to ensure justice or human survival. Until we as citizens find ways to make our governments more effective in confronting crises such as climate change, pandemic preparedness, anti-Black violence, and public health, many lives and even the human species will remain gravely imperiled. Meeting that imperative requires human agency and civic efficacy. In this sense, we are in the midst of an acute civic crisis.

Since at least the American Revolution, a central purpose of schooling in the United States has been civic education. As conceived by those who declared independence from Great Britain for what they understood to be violations of their civil and property rights, an education in knowledge and civic virtue was essential for equipping citizens to bear effective witness to truth and right in the face of corruption and abuses of power. Yet, as we know, truth itself is multiple and right is highly contested, nor do either speak for itself. Both depend, instead, on the voices and actions of those who have been educated about them. For these reasons, civic education must also be concerned with the cultivation of civic agency.

This chapter examines multiple historical attempts to address the challenge of educating future publics for pluralist democracy in the face of repeated violations and contestations of democratic ideals. It begins by posing four central problems of civic education, then analyzes select historical examples of how particular historical actors have understood and engaged those problems in their own lives and times, from the early national period through the late 20th century. To conclude, the chapter identifies how historical knowledge and reasoning can inform education for civic agency in our own time.

### Four Challenges of Civic Education

#### *Civic Education Implicates Both the Powerless and the Powerful*

Civic education implicates both the powerless and the powerful. Although the history of civic education is intrinsically intertwined with the history of “citizenship,” the principle of access to such education extends beyond citizens. Most of the provisions of the U.S. Constitution delineate rights and privileges of “persons” under the jurisdiction

of the U.S. government, not citizens (Bosniak, 2010). Even the 14th Amendment, which begins by defining a federal standard of citizenship, ends with clauses that (1) explicitly forbid states from depriving any “persons” of fundamental rights without due process of law; and (2) that extend “equal protection of the laws” to all “persons” within U.S. jurisdiction. In *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed that the constitution protected access to public education for all children under the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, regardless of citizenship or documented legal status. The court explained its decision with reference to the pivotal role of public education “in maintaining the fabric of society” and “sustaining our political and cultural heritage,” as well as to the necessity of education for individual well-being and the “ability to live within the structure of our civic institutions.”<sup>1</sup> In this sense, the civic value and necessity of education transcend long-running historical debates over definitions and eligibility for citizenship to encompass all persons residing in the United States—the powerless as well as the powerful.

At the same time, citizenship confers certain substantive imperatives and responsibilities on those who have it. The recognition, enforcement, and protection of civil rights depends on the civic knowledge, dispositions, and agency of those who exercise power in the United States. They depend, in other words, on the education of citizens. As both a policy project and a curriculum project, then, civic education must aim at educating citizens on the rights, powers, and protections that are guaranteed to *others*, as much as to themselves, and to the limitations of official power with respect to *all* persons under U.S. jurisdiction, whether citizens or not.

This point about *civic education as the education of those who already exercise power* bears repeating in light of both history and current crises. As argued more fully later in this chapter, civic education in the United States has often been hobbled by the presumption that its target audiences are those who wish to *become* citizens. In the early 20th century, for example, the central lessons of cultural pluralism, political tolerance, and minority rights supposedly encoded in U.S. constitutional law and American culture were most often taught as lessons of “Americanization” directed to immigrants and minorities, rather than lessons taught to citizens who already enjoyed political power.

The legacy of that history continues to this day, when those who actively seek U.S. citizenship through naturalization must pass “citizenship tests” that many birthright citizens cannot pass themselves. More profoundly, those persons whose civil rights are most routinely violated—that is, Blacks, Native Americans, Latinx,<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ persons, and members of other racialized and stigmatized ethnic and religious groups—have been forced to learn the basic terms and meaning (or meaninglessness) of constitutional rights and protections in a way that dominant members of society have not. A civic education equal to the challenges of our own time, then, must aim at the education of those who already presume to hold and exercise power as much as at those who do not.

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<sup>1</sup> *Plyler v. Doe*, 457 U.S. 202, p. 210 (1982).

<sup>2</sup> The term Latinx recognizes a preferred gender-neutral term embraced by many younger Americans who are either from, or who have family from, Latin America (Morales, 2018; Ortiz, 2018).

*Civic Education Is Itself Political*

Civic education is itself political. The fact that it implies citizenship means that it has always been embedded in conflicts over who should be accorded the status of citizens and recognized as having civil and political rights. Paradoxically, it is precisely because so many people see the answers to such questions as important that civic education is often a neglected priority. A convergence of interest in support of civic education across such differences can be difficult to effect.

The very concept of citizenship has a problematic history. Throughout European colonization and state formation in the Americas, it has been used to mark distinctions between settler and Native, between those who could claim to “own” land and those who could not. Under this “logic of elimination” (Wolfe, 2006), Indian identity and U.S. citizenship have often been constructed as mutually exclusive categories—a double bind that Native Americans have repeatedly sought to overcome and that in many ways remained unresolved even after the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act granted U.S. citizenship to “all non-citizen Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States” (Lomawaima, 2013).

Ideas of citizenship and civic education have also been highly racialized. The formal and informal education of elite leaders, soldiers, settlers, and ordinary laborers have often included direct lessons in White supremacy. Such lessons both constructed and justified the forced expropriation of territory from Indigenous peoples and the capture and enslavement of Africans that enriched European individuals and nations. They undergirded the eventual creation of the United States as an independent nation founded in part as a league for further violent expansion, labor exploitation, and appropriation of land and resources. They continued into the history of the nation itself and structured basic norms and ideas about who should be included in social and political institutions, including schools, and for what purposes (Gould, 1981; Hannaford, 1996; Malik, 1996; Stratton, 2016; Wolfe, 2002).

During much of the 19th century, most Whites opposed the idea of citizenship for African Americans, their admission to public schools, and their education at public expense. Similarly, California excluded Chinese and other residents racialized as non-White from public schools. In the 1880s Congress excluded Chinese immigrants from the United States entirely, a policy it later extended to other Asian immigrants. Conflicts over immigration and “Americanization” in the 1910s and 1920s led to laws further institutionalizing such restrictions and limiting immigrants from many countries to very low numbers, even when—as in the case of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe in the 1930s—their lives were in mortal danger. Versions of these same issues still stimulate opposition and conflict today.

*Legacies of Injustice Undermine Our Capacity to Support Civic Education*

Legacies of these and other injustices undermine civic education. To recognize such legacies involves much more than acknowledging past exclusions; it means confronting the ways that the very concepts and institutions fundamental to civic culture are infused with that history, which continues to put stumbling stones in our path. For example, the American experiment with republican “self-government” was from the beginning predicated on genocidal violence against Native Americans, appropriation of Native

American lands, and elimination of Native sovereignty, languages, and ways of life. Schools, moreover, were deployed as a major weapon in that dispossession and colonization process. How can American Indian students be engaged citizens in a nation whose existence is predicated on Indigenous erasure? Shouldn't all students confront this fundamental contradiction of American ideas of self-government and pluralism? How is that contradiction engaged in civic curriculum?

Ongoing realities of racial segregation also challenge the efficacy of civic education. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 confirmed that school segregation was anathema to American democracy. A decade later, civil rights legislation swept in a Second Reconstruction as the federal government enforced African American civil rights and oversaw the desegregation of public facilities, including schools, that created much higher levels of interracial contact. From the beginning, however, there were limits to change. Right away, in *Brown II* (1955), the Supreme Court delegated issues of enforcement to the same state jurisdictions that it judged had historically violated constitutional principles. This decision in turn produced a huge number of subsequent court cases seeking clarification of the Court's original decision. Then, starting in 1974, a series of U.S. Supreme Court rulings scaled back the Court's support for school integration (Bowman, 2015; Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012; Hannah-Jones, 2019; Ryan, 2010).

Yet, scholars have demonstrated that teaching students to engage in critical, measured reflection and discussion with those whose perspectives are different than their own will prepare future citizens who can do the same (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). For example, a recent study found that students who participated in organized deliberation over political issues had better perspective-taking abilities than those who did not. The authors of that study concluded that

The ability to identify rationales for positions with which one disagrees, in particular, is critical in a democracy. If students can identify legitimate rationales for positions in opposition to their own, they have at least started to understand the nature of the controversy, to understand that reasonable people can disagree. (Avery et al., 2014, p. 853)

How do we cultivate civic agency that is politically efficacious in a context in which many students—especially White students of privilege—have little regular contact with people whose race and class background and experience is substantially different from their own?

### *Civic Education Requires Deliberate Teaching and Teachers Require Support*

Civic education requires deliberate teaching. We cannot expect the knowledge and skills of responsible civic engagement to be transferred by osmosis. A recent examination of knowledge of civics administered in 2011 found that the majority of American citizens do not understand such foundational concepts as checks and balances and the importance of an independent judiciary. Only one-third of Americans could name all three branches of government; one-third could not name any. Just more than one-third thought that it was the intention of the Founding Fathers to have each branch hold a lot of power, but the president has the final say, a concept closer to a monarchy than a democracy (Gould et al., 2011). Given these conditions, we cannot expect sound civic education to occur through passive, informal learning.

The challenge of producing an educated and engaged citizenry has also proven to be more complex and complicated with the emergence of social media and digital learning. This has made it much more difficult for high school students and the general population to possess the tools necessary to sort fact from fiction and become informed citizens. In 2018, Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral investigated the differential diffusion of all of the verified true and false news stories distributed on Twitter from 2006 to 2017 (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The data comprised 126,000 stories tweeted by 3 million people more than 4.5 million times. Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information. They found that contrary to conventional wisdom, robots accelerated the spread of true and false news at the same rate, implying that false news spreads more than the truth because humans, not robots, are more likely to spread it. These and other findings suggest strongly that we need civic education to equip students to become a more knowledgeable and engaged citizenry.

To do this, schools and educators require support. Precisely because civic education is political, teaching it is challenging. Even the teaching of pedestrian democratic dispositions and skills like critical thinking and toleration for diverse cultures and beliefs is often controversial. It is not uncommon, even today, for teachers who try to create engaging, hands-on lessons about the Holocaust or slavery to run into trouble with parents and administrators who find the lessons insensitive, inappropriate, or threatening to their sense of entitlement. When these teachers are publicly reprimanded—or fired—it serves as a strong disincentive for their colleagues to take a similar risk (Burkholder, 2011). Today, very few teachers encourage robust deliberations of civics issues in American K–12 schools. Teachers cite a lack of content knowledge, ability to “control” spirited discussions, lack of time to dedicate to items that are not covered in standardized tests, and potential parent complaints as key reasons. Writing in 2016, Thomas Fallace imagined that only a crisis of epic proportions could create the social context for change needed to revise our current practices (Fallace, 2016; Goldstein, 2019). It seems that crisis is now.

#### **Four Ways of Conceptualizing the Importance of History for Civic Education**

History is central to civic education. It is important for both the design and implementation of civic education as policy *and* for the content and pedagogy of civic education as a curriculum. What follows are four ways of thinking about the significance of history for civic education policy and practice.

##### *History as a Form of Civic Reasoning*

Important as historical understanding is to effective civic agency, history does not repeat itself. Historical learning is not utilitarian in this sense. We cannot study the past in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. History is not a roadmap. Even more, history is not a sacrosanct set of warnings that we are obligated to obey. However, none of this is to say that history does not serve a crucial purpose in a democracy.



History is a category of civic reasoning. If taken seriously as a discrete mode of thinking, history helps people navigate the complexities of democratic citizenship.

History is critical to civic reasoning because it engenders contextual thinking. An essential historical concept, *context* is an explanation for how and why things happened in the past. Things happened, in part, because sets of circumstances—context—allowed them to happen, or even caused them to happen. Circumstances inevitably change. Historical thinking is a disciplined way of thinking through that change in context. This is an essential skill of democratic citizenship and governance. Moreover, it is an essential responsibility for us as we contemplate issues of civic education in our own time. How well we think through our current context will shape the consequences and significance of any actions we take now.

### *History as Confronting Legacies of the Past*

Although we are strong advocates of historical learning as integral to civic education, the main point of this chapter is a bit different. This chapter looks at history in order to better understand how civic education has been shaped by power dynamics that have excluded certain peoples and ideas. The aim in this discussion is to confront that history. It is essential to confront history in order to meet the central problems that challenge civic education. That is because the idea of civic education that guides this project—one of cultivating civic reasoning—assumes a “we” of civic discourse that cannot simply be assumed. The politics of civic education, the legacies of injustice, and the diffusion of falsehood all challenge that assumption. In this context, it is only by “working-off-the-past” that the “we” necessary for civic discourse can be forged (Neiman, 2019).<sup>3</sup> That includes both the “we” of civic education as policy and the “we” of civic education in the classroom. Our goal is to advance the kind of transformative civic education that scholars like James A. Banks argue helps all citizens—including those from marginalized groups—become efficacious and participatory citizens (Banks, 2017).

### *History as a Repertoire of Evidence and Examples*

History provides evidence and examples of how real people engaged crucial civic issues in the context of crisis, conflict, and injustice. In May 1944, 32 Black high school seniors in Julia Brogdon’s “Problems of Democracy” class composed and sent individual letters to the College of Charleston requesting information about entrance requirements and admission to the school (Baker, 2006). These actions challenging violations of the 14th Amendment arose out of the class’s comparative analysis of racially restricted admission policies at municipal colleges in the United States. In this sense, they also provide evidence of how a certain model of civic education was enacted in certain classrooms during the World War II and immediate postwar era.

By 1933–1934, according to Thomas Fallace, about one-third of all U.S. high schools had adopted some version of the “Problems of Democracy” course (Fallace, 2016). As Fallace recounts, the idea of the course derived most immediately from progressive

<sup>3</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the concept of *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* (“working-off-the-past”) as understood and practiced in Germany and reconsidered in the context of the United States, see Neiman, S. (2019). *Learning from the Germans: Race and the memory of evil*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

curriculum planning in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, as represented by the report of the National Education Association's (NEA's) 1916 Committee on Social Studies. The case of Julia Brogdan in turn illuminates how a teacher enacted the idea in a particular classroom in the context of totalitarianism not only abroad, but at home under Jim Crow. As educators, scholars, and policy makers, we can learn from this model of civic education.

### *Historical Understanding and the Cultivation of Agency*

The origins of Julia Brogdan's "Problems of Democracy" course were not only in the NEA, however. Brogdan graduated from Allen University in Columbia, South Carolina, and received her master's degree from Atlanta University, where she studied with Horace Mann Bond and W. E. B. Du Bois (Baker, 2006, pp. 66–67). Both Allen and Atlanta were historically Black institutions founded during Reconstruction, as was the Avery Institute in Charleston, where Brogdan taught. Her education and teaching at those institutions connected her with deep traditions of western thought and also with a trans-generational network of educational leaders and political activists who knew where they were in history and who understood themselves as historical agents. Cultivating a sense of historical agency is a crucial component of civic education. It is important for us as scholars and educators as well as for students. To become engaged citizens, we must believe that engagement matters.

## **LEGACIES—SEVEN HISTORICAL EXAMPLES**

A historical perspective reveals how power dynamics in the past shaped civic education in ways that simultaneously mobilized concerted civic effort and excluded or discriminated against certain people and ideas. The remainder of the chapter considers how these forces shaped the practice of civic education and changing definitions of democracy and citizenship. It shows how diverse people fought to create more inclusive civic education and more just and robust visions of what it means to sustain a pluralist democracy that recognizes and protects the rights of all. A critical analysis of past examples of civic education and activism, this chapter argues, will help us cultivate the powers of civic reasoning and civic agency necessary to confront both the ongoing legacies of injustice and the current critical issues of our time.

First, a word about definitions. From a historical perspective, there are no a priori definitions of civic education. The idea of "civic education" as a "course in government" was an invention of the 20th century. For much of U.S. history, by contrast, the notion of civic education was more broadly conceived as "education for citizenship." The central problem of civic education in that context was a problem of "diffusion." It was about increasing access to the relatively undisputed content in reading, writing, arithmetic, history, and geography presumed to prepare people for citizenship. The point of this chapter is to examine the history of civic education—broadly conceived as "education for citizenship"—in order to recognize the historical tensions and contradictions that have attended that project in the United States and to learn how diverse people have mobilized their own resources, civic traditions, and ideas to address those contradictions. In the process, we also highlight factors that shaped the emergence in the 20th century of ideas of "civic education" that involved specific dedicated curriculum in Americanization, government, tolerance, and "problems of democracy."



### **Historical Agency and Civic Education in the American Revolution: The Uses of History**

Civic education was essential to the agency and activism of participants in the founding of the United States as an independent nation and the (re)formation of colonies as states during the revolutionary and early republican eras. Those participants included not only the famous Founding Fathers, but also ordinary men and women engaged in a variety of formal and informal governance and learning contexts from local churches, town meetings, and common schools to workingmen's associations, guild-like clubs such as the Freemasons, and a wide range of learning and literacy societies. Together with formal schools and literary institutions such as colleges, academies, and seminaries, these self-governing and often independently incorporated organizations formed the combined reservoir of social and political capital that constituted civic education and culture in Anglo America (Beadie, 2010).

A practical education in this culture involved initiation into a number of ordinary tools of associational life, such as the circulation of petitions, the drafting of articles of association, the writing of constitutions, the practice of basic parliamentary procedure, the presentation and voting of resolutions, minute-taking, and the raising of funds through pledges of joint responsibility and self-taxation. An intellectual education in this culture, meanwhile, included familiarity with the principles of government articulated in various traditions of political philosophy along with historical knowledge of prior experiments with different models of governance, political economy, and trade. As Benjamin Franklin explained in his famous *Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth* published in 1749:

History will ... give occasion to expatiate on the Advantage of Civil Orders and Constitutions, how Men and their Properties are protected by joining in Societies and establishing Government; their Industry encouraged and rewarded, Arts invented, and Life made more comfortable: The Advantages of Liberty, Mischiefs of Licentiousness, Benefits arising from good Laws and a due Execution of Justice, & c. Thus may the first Principles of sound Politics be fix'd in the Minds of Youth. (Franklin, 1749, p. 22)

To achieve these ends, Franklin recommended reading not only ancient history and classical authors, but "the best Modern Histories, particularly of our Mother Country; then of these Colonies; which should be accompanied with Observations on their Rise, Encrease, Use to Great Britain, Encouragements, Discouragements, & c. the Means to make them flourish, secure their Liberties, & c." (Franklin, 1749, p. 25). Writing as a loyal British subject and counsellor for a full generation before the events that would eventually precipitate the American Revolution, Franklin nonetheless specified the value of learning about the historical benefits that the colonies had conferred on Great Britain, the policies that either encouraged or discouraged their flourishing, and the means of securing their liberties.

The diffusion of such practical and intellectual civic knowledge proved essential in the conflicts with Great Britain that ensued. Colonial protests against the Stamp, Townshend, and Intolerable Acts of the 1760s and 1770s took the form of joint resolutions and non-importation agreements forged and enforced by local associations of ordinary households on the model of other voluntary associations and self-governing

bodies (Gross, 1976). Moreover, as Pauline Maier has shown, it was not only colonial representatives to the Continental Congress but also ordinary participants in many town, county, and colonial-level conventions who drew on principles and precedents from British and colonial history—especially including the Declaration of Rights of 1689—in drafting their own local declarations of independence in spring and summer 1776. Important was knowledge not only of specific prior cases of resistance to the Crown, but also of the form, principle, and practice of “declarations” as legal instruments by which claims of wrongdoing on the part of a king and his counsellors were publicly declared, the legitimacy of his authority disputed, and public support for his removal solicited (Maier, 1998, pp. 47–96).

Civic agency during the American Revolution thus drew on history in at least three ways: (1) as a sense of shared identity as a people with a common set of expectations, norms, and prerogatives regarding good government established by tradition and law; (2) as a repertoire of historical examples and precedents for understanding current predicaments; and (3) as a tradition providing a toolkit of practices and templates for action in current circumstances. All three of these uses of history remain resources for civic reasoning today.

### **Visions and Dilemmas of Civic Education in the Early Republic: The Power of Context**

The next generation sought to institutionalize the education necessary to sustain this understanding of common history, legal prerogatives, and principles of good government. In 1795, the American Philosophical Society (APS)—which included among its members the nation’s first presidents, leading scientists, and other political and cultural leaders—sponsored a prize contest for an essay proposing the system of education “best calculated to promote the general welfare of the United States” (Justice, 2013). A close look at the submitted essays reveals the logic and the dilemmas of civic education in the early Republic.

With regard to curriculum, the two winning essays by Samuel Knox and Samuel Harrison Smith differed in their emphasis on classical language learning versus modern languages and content. This difference illuminates the significance of history as a way of envisioning the expansion of citizenship and self-governance during the early republican era. In the late 18th century, an emphasis on history and geography as subjects of study provided a means of surmounting the obstacles to liberal learning that had long been constrained by an insistence on reading Latin and Greek texts in the original language. Reading such texts in translation or as summarized in histories by ancient writers like Livy and Plutarch or by more modern writers such as Charles Rollins became a popular and even standard element of English language curricula. Perhaps even more importantly, English-language translations and histories became widely available in print for those pursuing self-education.

Exemplifying this more accessible approach, Samuel Harrison Smith echoed Franklin before him in making history central to the curriculum, especially with respect to civic content. Higher grades of primary education should include “the concise study of General History and a more detailed acquaintance with the history of our own country; of Geography; of the laws of nature, practically illustrated in agriculture and

mechanics; and to commit to memory, and frequently to repeat, the constitution and the fundamental laws of the United States" (Smith, 1797/2013, p. 213).

Even as Smith presented an inclusive educational vision by grounding it in English education rather than classical languages and literature, his vision was constraining in other ways. For starters, Smith's proposal, like the other submissions, focused explicitly on the education of boys. In delineating the basic principles of his proposed system, Smith stated "that every male child, without exception, be educated" (Smith, 1797/2013, p. 213).

This gender exclusivity is surprising in two ways. First, as Margaret Nash points out in her essay on the topic, it cut against the grain of current trends in intellectual thought at the time (Nash, 2013). Female education was a common topic of discussion at the end of the 18th century among many of the same political and cultural leaders who comprised the membership of the APS. Indeed, several members—including Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and even Thomas Jefferson in his 1785 *Notes on the State of Virginia*—were on record as favoring the systematic education of women. Second, the exclusion of women from Smith's plan contradicted existing practice. Girls and young women quite commonly attended school in many areas of the country in the late 18th century. Largely due to this widespread school attendance, female literacy rates rose significantly during the last half of the 18th century, becoming virtually equal with that of males by the 1820s. As the pool of literate girls and young women widened, so did the demand for female schooling beyond the elementary level, a demand that by the end of the 18th century was met not only by private tutors or schools held in women's homes, but by increasing numbers of academies and seminaries (Kerber, 1980; Nash, 2005; Norton, 1980).

Ordinary practice, in other words, already substantially exceeded the principles of school access with respect to sex stated in essays submitted to the APS contest in 1795–1797. To some degree, though to a lesser extent, the same was true of school access with respect to race. Free Blacks and some enslaved persons did attend school during the early republican era, particularly in northern cities but also in some border and southern cities such as Baltimore, Maryland; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Louisville, Kentucky (Horton & Horton, 1997; Lucas, 2003; Mabee, 1979; Moss, 2013; Nash, 1991; Tolley, 2005). Typically, such education occurred in charity or church schools organized specifically as "colored" or "African free" schools or in pay schools organized by independent teachers, including some established and taught by African Americans. In Philadelphia specifically, as Hilary Moss points out, publicly advertised Black schools date back to the 1720s, including an influential school for free and some enslaved Blacks founded by Anthony Benezet around 1750 that continuously operated well into the 19th century (Hornick, 1975; Moss, 2013; Nash, 1991). Given that context, Samuel Harrison Smith's stated principle "that every male child, without exception, be educated" *could* have been intended to include Black boys, though it is far from clear that it did.

Such explicit and implicit exclusions by race and sex in proposals for a system of education "best calculated to promote the general welfare of the United States" may not seem surprising to anyone not already familiar with common practices of female schooling and the existence of schools for Blacks in this era. To most modern readers, and even most historians, such exclusions by race and sex may be so taken for granted

as to hardly bear examination. However, recognizing the reasons that stated principles of access to education were more narrow than existing practice is essential to understanding the history and appreciating the ongoing significance of civic education in society.

It is important to recognize that it was precisely because of the public and civic purpose of the educational system they were proposing that Samuel Harrison Smith and other proponents of public education were so circumspect about the inclusion of women and African Americans in their plans. To appreciate this point, it helps to look closely at how Smith himself stated that civic purpose. At the end of his very long (90 pp.) *Remarks on Education*, Smith summarized the importance of education for the “individual citizen”:

The citizen, enlightened, will be a freeman in its truest sense. He will know his rights, and he will understand the rights of others; discerning the connection of his interest with the preservation of these rights, he will as firmly support those of his fellow men as his own. (Smith, 1797/2013, p. 216)

Here we have as clear and simple of a statement of the importance of an educated citizenry for the preservation of republican government as existed at the time. “Knowing one’s own rights” and “understanding the rights of others” seems an obvious and innocuous statement of enlightenment logic in support of the value of public education for civil society. Yet, the statement also reveals how the language of citizenship (as distinct from that of “personhood”) imposed limitations on the educational vision proposed. What rights, exactly, did a woman or an African American have in 18th century society? To what extent could one imagine including either in the term “freeman”? What would it mean to “understand the rights of others” when those others were women or African Americans?

What these questions highlight is the political nature of the document Smith created and the limits that politics imposed. Any document that answered the question posed by the essay contest—which was essentially to propose a national system of education—was of course a political document. That, in turn, meant that in order for the essay to have a prospect of winning the contest, and more ambitiously, for the proposed plan to win a hearing with a broader audience, it had to take that larger political context and audience into account. Precisely because contemporary debate connected the issues of female education and women’s rights, Smith could imagine nothing he could say on female education that could win broad assent. For that reason, he said nothing and thus in effect limited his principles to something much less than existing practice.

This problem of political consensus at the heart of the civic education project was even more salient with respect to African Americans. Slaveholder power, land speculation, and the pursuit of wealth were essential to the revolutionary movement and to the confederation that successfully prosecuted the U.S. War for Independence. That coalition was institutionalized first in the Articles of Confederation and eventually in the U.S. Constitution. Maintaining that coalition through ongoing challenges to national independence remained a central preoccupation of the federal government through the early national period, up to the Civil War, and arguably to this day. In that context,

any ostensibly “national” program that challenged slaveholder power was politically untenable. Certainly, a proposal for a national public education system that explicitly proposed to educate Black males as citizens who “knew their rights” would have represented such a challenge. It is not surprising that no such direct challenge was made by APS essay contest participants.

More than that though, and somewhat more difficult to apprehend, is the point that Eric Foner made decades ago in his study of Thomas Paine. Paine recognized the fundamental moral contradiction embedded in a movement that cried for liberty even as it countenanced legal and political systems of bondage. “With what consistency, or decency,” he asked in a newspaper piece published in March 1775, could the colonists “complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousand in slavery?” (Foner, 2005, p. 73). Yet, as Foner argued, slavery was essential to the revolution precisely because it removed a large portion of the laboring population from the prospect of political rights, and thus from the potential to challenge a landed gentry who never would have endorsed the revolutionary movement otherwise. “By eliminating altogether the question of political rights for the laboring population, slavery enabled the wealthy planters for whom Madison spoke to embrace republicanism and representative government” (Foner, 2005, p. 89).

Understood from this perspective, the very convergence of interests that made the republican experiment of the United States possible assumed the categorical denial of citizenship and basic human rights by race. A proposal for a national system of public education that depended on those in power agreeing to the principle that all laborers should be educated as citizens with political rights was not politically viable in a context where the coalition of confederated states had to be maintained in order to withstand external challenges. Understanding the significance of that context is essential for understanding the concept of liberty itself (Berlin & Hoffman, 1983; Davis, 1999; Nash, 2006). It is also an example of how contextual thinking is essential to civic reasoning. For indeed, the legacy of the revolutionary era context of confederation is with us still.

Of course, the fact that officially promoting the education of Blacks for “citizenship” proved politically problematic did not mean that Black communities did not themselves cultivate civic knowledge, agency, and activism. Enslaved persons pursued self-education and participated in clandestine schools and informal learning (Franklin & Higginbotham, 2011; Williams, 2005). Meanwhile, free Black leaders and communities increasingly drew on their own social and religious organizations and ideas to establish schools, confront anti-Blackness, challenge slavery itself, and assert equal rights and equal citizenship (Baumgartner, 2019b; Jones, 2018; Moss, 2009; Rael, 2002). As racist legal exclusions and anti-Black violence increased in the 19th century, these leaders and communities responded with civic-minded efforts to call Americans back to founding principles. In Connecticut, for example, Black women and girls seeking education stood up to violence against them and publicly asserted an alternative moral vision (Baumgartner, 2019a). In Boston, David Walker (1830) issued his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* calling out hypocrisy in the land of “liberty.”<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>4</sup> David Walker’s address was written in 1829 and printed in 1830 as a pamphlet entitled David Walker’s appeal, in four articles, together with a preamble, to the coloured citizens of the world, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America.



Philadelphia, the Reverend Richard Allen organized the first Colored or Negro Conventions while the businessman James Forten helped fund the establishment of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, and published a series of essays laying a foundation for the abolitionist movement that followed (Nash, 2006). This was civic education too—and in the fullest sense.

### **Civic Education and Sovereignty in the Common School Era: Tensions and Contradictions**

Civic education became the leading rationale for promoting public schools at municipal, state, and territorial levels in the 19th century. While education sponsored by private groups at private expense could aim at many things—whether vocational, religious, social, or cultural—education at public expense required a justification in terms of the common or public good. Until the 1820s, schooling in Anglo-America developed in highly decentralized ways, primarily through local initiatives, though occasionally supplemented by state, municipal, or tribal funds on an institution-by-institution basis. Systematic development of schools at public expense at the state or territorial level began occurring in a major way during the 1820s and 1830s. Education for citizenship provided the central justification for this systems expansion.

This movement to expand schooling on a systematic basis included the sovereign nations of Indian Territory after the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Looking at the common school movement in comparative perspective with a focus on Indian Territory highlights the possibilities as well as some of the tensions and contradictions of education for self-government among sovereignties that sometimes conflicted with each other—tensions and contradictions that would come to a head in multiple ways during the Civil War.

An important fact to recognize about civic education and school system development in the United States during the common school era is the extent to which they depended directly on the expropriation of Native American lands. This dynamic had roots in the early republican era. Beginning in 1785 and 1787 with the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance, the federal government dedicated portions of newly acquired federal lands for support of education, a model it elaborated in subsequent territorial acquisitions and acts. From the beginning, Congress framed the justification for such provisions in terms of civic purpose: “Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged” (Tyack et al., 1987, pp. 20–42).

Essentially a byproduct of land policy, these federal provisions for school support used lands appropriated from Native Americans as a means of promoting White settlement. School lands offered settlers a benefit that incentivized the kind of family formation and institution-building necessary to occupy and hold the territory, while they also promoted the formation of citizenry and leaders who would establish and sustain Anglo-style systems of self-government, thereby converting the territory from Indian to White settler control (Beadie, 2016a; Beadie et al., 2016; Lee & Ahtone, 2020; Nash, 2019). Thus, Native dispossession and White citizenship education were directly connected in the common school era. Together, they operated as a central dynamic of settler colonialism in North America.

This dynamic became particularly relentless in the Jacksonian era of the 1820s and 1830s when, not incidentally, the elimination of property qualifications for voting and the expansion of White male suffrage in U.S. states increased the demand for additional Native land expropriation, racially exclusive laws, and racially restricted definitions of citizenship. As rights increasingly came to be seen as inhering in the person rather than in wealth or position, the question of which persons had inherent rights became more salient and more explicitly exclusive by race and sex (Berthoff, 1989). This was a period of escalating anti-Black, anti-Indian racism, including the passage of widespread anti-literacy laws in the South and the Indian Removal Act of 1830, all reinforced with vigilante violence, with some of it directly threatened and encouraged by the Andrew Jackson administration. Meanwhile, these new repressions of slavery and violations of Native treaties were justified by a new, specifically American, racist “science” of phrenology (Gould, 1981).

It was in this context that U.S. states established systems of common education and it was under this relentless pressure that some Native nations developed systems of schooling as well. Indigenous leaders at various stages of the settler colonial project promoted and facilitated certain forms of western education for their children and future leaders in a deliberate effort to enable them to be effective in advancing and protecting tribal interests with and against White settlers and the U.S. federal government. Thus, in the early 19th century, tribal nations such as the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek of the Southeast developed academic institutions that in many ways paralleled, imitated, and rivaled academies intended for White social and political elites (Castelow, 2002; Mihesuah, 1993; Snyder, 2017b).

One of the most influential of these institutions was Choctaw Academy. Founded in 1825 in Great Crossings, Kentucky, under a special joint agreement between the Choctaw Nation and the U.S. federal government, Choctaw Academy actively recruited and enrolled nascent leaders from 17 different Native nations, extending from the Ojibwe to the Seminole, from the Osage to the Shawnee.<sup>5</sup> At Choctaw Academy, students pursued a standard western academic curriculum on a model much like that articulated previously by Benjamin Franklin and William Harrison Smith, including English language studies, history, and classics. As detailed by the historian Christina Snyder (2017b), that curriculum led cadres of nascent Native leaders to articulate visions of national sovereignty for Indian nations replete with historical examples from ancient Greek city states, the U.S. Revolution, and Irish independence movements. As interpreted and taken up by Native students, in other words, the curriculum at Choctaw Academy amounted to a civic education for Native sovereignty.

This vision of education for sovereignty was cruelly betrayed with the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and the actions that followed. As Tsianina Lomawaima (2015) has argued, the federal government under the Jackson administration directly violated the federal Constitution and sacrificed Native sovereignty in order to facilitate the expropriation of Native lands by the states and White residents of Georgia and Mississippi, and thereby preserve the Union under threat of southern secession.

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<sup>5</sup> Choctaw Academy students came from the tribal nations and homelands of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Dakota, Iowa, Menominee, Mesquakie and Sauk, Miami, Ojibwe, Omaha, Osage, Ottawa, Potawatomi, Quapaw, Seminole, and Shawnee (Snyder, 2017a, p. 15).

For a decade or more after removal, surviving Indian migrants and leaders continued to send some of their most promising youth to school under prior arrangements, including at Choctaw Academy in Kentucky. In 1842, however, after repeated reports of deteriorating conditions at Choctaw, the General Council of the Choctaw commissioned one of their members, Peter Pitchlynn, to take their demands to Washington, DC, seize control of tribal school funds, and withdraw Choctaw students. Other nations of Indian Territory soon followed the Choctaw example, often with Pitchlynn as their representative, with the result that Choctaw Academy closed in 1848 and Native nations within Indian Territory established their own schools and school systems. Carrying forward practices and in some cases transplanting existing institutions from their original reserved territories in Georgia, Mississippi, and elsewhere in the South, Indian nations such as the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek initially concentrated tribal resources, including federal annuities intended for education, in a small number of institutions intended to educate tribal leaders (Castelow, 2002; Mihesuah, 1993; Snyder, 2017a; Steineker, 2016b) but soon expanded schooling on a common school model to include a wider range of students.

Importantly, a number of Choctaw alumni went on to take up leadership roles as promoters of developing school systems during the 1840s and 1850s. As detailed by historian Rowan Steineker with respect to the Creek Nation and by Christina Snyder with respect to the Choctaw Nation, the resulting systems in Indian territory focused on making basic or common education more universal among ordinary households, as well as on educating promising students as teachers and leaders. According to Snyder, the Choctaw Nation schools hired mostly Native teachers and taught children and adults in both English and Choctaw. Much like developing common school systems simultaneously being established in other states and territories such as Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin, they matched central funds with local initiative and funding (Steineker, 2016a). In this respect, the school systems of Indian Territory in the common school era effectively provided civic education, or education for citizenship, in self-governing sovereignties with the potential to operate as states-within-a-state on a parallel with (though still distinct from) those of other states and territories in the federalist union of the United States (Lomawaima, 2015).

Though such a possibility of course presented its own tensions and potential conflicts, they were not entirely different from those that attended other territories with linguistically and/or culturally distinct populations, particularly after U.S. aggression and acquisition of territory in Mexico in the 1830s and 1840s. Most communities in New Mexico, and many in Arizona, Colorado, and Texas, continued to employ Spanish-speaking teachers in their schools (or German-speaking teachers, as the case required) to reflect Catholic tradition and teaching (or Lutheran or Mormon teaching) for decades after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the 1846 admission of Texas to statehood (Blanton, 2004; Getz, 1997; Lozano, 2018; McDonald, 2004). For that matter, German communities and Catholic communities throughout the United States with a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Belgian, Czech, French, Welsh) continued to hold school in their home languages taught by teachers who shared their ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds through much of the 19th century (Justice, 2005; Tyack, 2003; Vinyard, 1998).

At the same time, territories and states before the Civil War maintained considerable autonomy over who was defined as a “citizen” and (thus) also what “education

for citizenship” looked like. Paradoxically, perhaps, this condition of semi-autonomous sovereignty allowed both for a degree of cultural pluralism and for multiple forms of racial exclusion. This kind of racialized citizenship occurred in the Nations of Indian Territory as well. Thus, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole, who had brought enslaved Blacks with them to Indian Territory from the Southeast and increased their slaveholding for cotton farming in the Territory, practiced a racially repressive regime of law and education that paralleled in some respects the rest of the slaveholding South. With schooling more directly under tribal authority and subsidized more directly by tribally held central funds (albeit from federal sources), the systems increasingly defined access to such funded schools in terms of a racially exclusive idea of tribal membership. Specifically, most tribally run schools in Indian territory excluded African American residents, many of whom were currently or historically enslaved by tribal members (Snyder, 2017a; Steineker, 2016a). In this regard, too, the school systems of Indian Territory paralleled those of common school systems established in other U.S. states and territories in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, almost all of which explicitly specified their school constituencies and inhabitants eligible for citizenship as “White” (Beadie, 2016a; Thorpe, 1909).

Thus, on the eve of the Civil War, civic education and public schooling in the United States was simultaneously pluralist and racially exclusionary. This fundamental tension between collective sovereignty and equal citizenship was endemic to the common school project and endures today. It continues to challenge attempts to shape a civic education policy that extends to all regions and populations with equal justice.

### **Antebellum Black Activism and Postbellum Educational Reconstruction: Contingency and Consequence**

Founded during the era of slavery, America’s first public schools were neither designed nor intended to serve African Americans. To the contrary, most Whites viewed it as logical to prohibit Black access to antebellum public schools, as they did not view free Blacks as eligible for American citizenship. This is why even in northern states with relatively robust systems of public education, Whites routinely barred Black youth from public schools before 1865 (Anderson, 1988; Davis, 2011; Douglas, 2005, pp. 12–60). Common schools taught citizenship explicitly through a curriculum of Protestant morality, American civics and history, American-style grammar and spelling, the geography of the young nation, and enough reading, writing, and mathematics to prepare adults to read a newspaper and pay their taxes. At the same time, common schools taught citizenship implicitly by refusing to include many African Americans, Native Americans, Chinese Americans, and Mexican Americans, among other students of color. In this way, public schools were one of many institutions that constructed an explicitly racialized conception of American citizenship (Kaestle, 1983, pp. 38–39, pp. 171–179; Litwack, 1961, pp. 113–152; Mabee, 1970, pp. 139–184; Moss, 2009, pp. 1–13; Rael, 2002, pp. 1–5; Woodson, 1968, pp. 229–255).

African Americans viewed education as essential to emancipation, self-sufficiency, and political equality. When they were denied entry to the new common schools, Black northerners petitioned local governments for admittance, but were met with fierce resistance from Whites who either ignored these pleas or created segregated schools for

Black students. Such schools sprouted in Boston, Detroit, Hartford, New Haven, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Portland, Portsmouth, Providence, Rochester, and Trenton, as well as smaller towns like Nantucket and Salem. Faced with the grim choice of total exclusion from the common schools or access on a segregated basis, many northern Black families accepted the latter. In some cases, White school leaders sweetened the deal by hiring Black teachers and administrators for the “colored” schools of the North (Burkholder, in press; Douglas, 2005, pp. 1–60).

As racial tensions intensified and civil war loomed, a growing number of Black leaders began to question the wisdom of state-sponsored school segregation. Like other Americans, they saw plainly the relationship between public schools and citizenship. To advance their argument that African Americans deserved equal rights, Black leaders insisted that the public schools accept Black students on a nondiscriminatory basis (Baptiste, 2014, pp. 343–397; Lubat, 2010; Mabee, 1979, pp. 183–187; Moss, 2009; Murphy, 2014).

African American campaigns to abolish segregated schools appeared in Nantucket and Salem in the 1840s and spread to Boston, Rochester, and beyond as a defining feature of northern Black political protest. Speaking on behalf of integrationists in Boston in 1849, Benjamin F. Roberts argued that “exclusive schools” were an obstacle to their “common rights” as citizens, and furthermore that segregated schools created “the odious distinction of caste” that was anathema to American democracy (Bigelow et al., 1849, pp. 24–48).

Led by Black abolitionists and their White allies, the school integration movement was joined by Black students and parents, especially mothers, who viewed race-based school assignments as demeaning, discriminatory, and unjust. As Black school integrationist William C. Nell wrote from Boston in 1855,

In the dark hours of our struggle, when betrayed by traitors within and beset by foes without, while some men would become lukewarm and indifferent, despairing of victory; then did the women keep the flame alive, and as their hopes would weave bright visions for the future, their husbands and brothers would rally for a new attack upon the fortress of color-phobia. Yes, Sir, it was the mothers (God bless them!) of these little bright eyed-boys and girls, who, through every step of our progress, were executive and vigilant, even to that memorable Monday morning (September 3, 1855), the trial hour, when the colored children of Boston went up to occupy the long-promised land. (*The Liberator*, 1855, emphasis in original)

Nell added that Black mothers accompanied him to persuade White school administrators that Black families wanted to attend “White” schools. Black women visited the homes of White teachers and school committee members and pledged to have their children “punctually at school, and neat in their dress,” and to aid their instructors in all other ways (*The Liberator*, 1855). Black women participated in political actions, visited with White school teachers and administrators, and encouraged children to recognize their presence in previously all-White schools as a form of patriotic protest. In this and many other instances in antebellum era, Black girls and women made claims on the public as education activists (Baumgartner, 2019a, 2019b).

Struggles for school integration in the North gained the support of prominent civil rights leaders who insisted that state-sponsored segregation represented a dangerous



form of state-sponsored discrimination. In 1859, Black abolitionist Frederick Douglass made the provocative argument that African Americans should prioritize school integration over the most prized of citizenship rights—equal suffrage. Douglass argued that children would get to know each other, thus breaking down prejudice and creating a new social context where Black Americans would be treated equally. He concluded, “Contact on equal terms is the best way to abolish Caste: *it is caste abolished*” (Douglass, 1859).

The primary goal of early Black school integrationists like Douglass was not to equalize educational opportunities for Black youth (although many hoped it would do so), but instead to transform the civic function of public education by symbolizing Black equality and reducing anti-Black prejudice. They were joined by Black families who realized that segregated schools engendered an unequal distribution of state resources. As a result, a growing and diverse chorus of Black northerners recognized school segregation as a terrible weapon of oppression, and school integration as a powerful force for equality.

This call for equal citizenship to some degree pushed against powers of self-government and state sovereignty. As outlined in the previous section, civic education and school system development in the United States operated on a pluralist model on the eve of the Civil War. Citizenship and civic education were defined by largely independent sovereignties on a state-by-state, territory-by-territory basis. The resulting systems paralleled each other morphologically, but also differed from each other in important ways, including forms of cultural membership and racial exclusion. In New Mexico, for example, a large non-English speaking population organized schools, selected teachers, leaders, and other public officials who shared those language and cultural traditions (Getz, 1997; Lozano, 2018, pp. 89–110). Similarly, in Mormon Utah, alternative traditions of household formation, property ownership, religious authority, and government informed the cultural content and leadership of schools and school systems (Esplin & Randall, 2014; Limerick, 1987, pp. 280–288). The nations of Indian Territory, in this respect, were not wholly different from other territories of the West where a pluralist approach to cultural and political sovereignty persisted. Meanwhile, many states, territories, and nations exercised their sovereignty in racially exclusive ways. The Oregon state constitution of 1857, for example, explicitly excluded free Negroes and mulattos from residing in the state and from all rights of property or access to courts of justice. It further specified that “no Negro, Chinaman, or mulatto shall have the right of suffrage.” On what basis could such racially exclusive definitions of citizenship—and of citizenship education—be challenged and changed?

During the Civil War, the multiple sovereignties that composed the country came into direct conflict with each other and with the federal government. That conflict resulted in a consolidation of federal power. It also produced attempts to define a common standard of citizenship and civic education. Through Reconstruction amendments to the federal constitution and other acts, Congress redefined citizenship and civil rights to include African Americans (Anderson, 2007). In this context, the African American movement for school integration in the North achieved some success. Between 1866 and 1877 every northern state except for Indiana that had previously required or permitted school segregation outlawed segregated schools.

This was a crucial victory that compelled White school leaders to permit Black students to attend public schools, and it opened new opportunities for Black educational,

economic, and social advancement. It did not, however, end racial discrimination and segregation, and in fact school segregation increased as White school leaders found ways to gerrymander school assignments and isolate Black students well into the 20th century. Because racially segregated schools permitted school leaders to not only hoard the best resources for White children, but also symbolically deny African Americans equal citizenship, the struggle for school integration would become a defining feature of the 20th century Black civil rights movement (Davis, 2011, pp. 72–96; Douglas, 2005, pp. 68–83; Du Bois, 1955/2002, p. 158; Painter, 1977, p. 49).

From the 1860s through 1880s, Congress also considered a series of proposals that would have established a federal system of funding and basic regulation for common schools (Beadie, 2016b). The explicit rationale for such a system rested solidly on the idea that the survival of republican government required universal education for citizenship (Black, 2018). Meanwhile, under state Reconstruction governments, African Americans themselves organized common schools and school systems and established many important institutions of Black higher education, sometimes affiliated with church denominations or missionary organizations (Butchart, 2010; Favours, 2019; Green, 2016; Span, 2009; Williams, 2005). After two decades of “educational reconstruction,” however, the federal government abandoned the sponsorship and protection of such institutions and the enforcement of constitutional principles, allowing for the violent suppression of Black civil and human rights by explicitly White supremacist governments under Jim Crow state constitutions. Despite the 14th Amendment, the power to define citizenship and civil rights essentially returned to a state-by-state basis in the U.S. South. As the historian James Anderson succinctly summarized the ensuing history, “Both schooling for democratic citizenship and schooling for second-class citizenship have been basic traditions in American education” (Anderson, 1988, p. 1).

In the West, however, the Civil War had different, and in some ways, opposite effects. Whereas the federal government essentially withdrew from responsibility for enforcing common standards of citizenship, civil rights, and education for African Americans in the South, it actively deployed its consolidated power to force assimilation through education for Indian nations and, to a lesser extent, other religious and language minorities in the territorial West. There, the federal government used its consolidated power to exclude Chinese from immigration and naturalized citizenship while violently seizing control of most Native land and resources for national railroad, timber, mining, and manufacturing interests and development (Adams, 1995; Anderson, 2007; Beadie, 2016a, 2019a; Cronon, 1991; White, 2011).

It was at this point that U.S. education policies for settler populations and for Native Americans fundamentally diverged. Despite the prewar existence of common school systems in Indian territory and serious proposals in the 1890s for an independent state of Sequoia created from Indian territory, Indian nations and peoples were not accorded the same dispensation as former White confederate powers, or even as the persistently Spanish-dominant territory of New Mexico (Burton, 1995, p. 249; Lozano, 2018; Meinig, 1998, pp. 174–175, pp. 301–305; Wickett, 2003, p. 171). Instead, in the 1880s and 1890s the federal government imposed a system of forced land allotment and assimilation through a federal Indian boarding school system (Adams, 1995; Gram, 2015; Lomawaima, 1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). More specifically, through the Curtis Act of 1898, the federal government actively abrogated land and treaty

agreements with nations in Indian territory and destroyed existing school systems in favor of the federal system of Indian boarding schools. Thus, the United States implemented two fundamentally divergent education policies at the end of the 19th century: one policy that allowed for maximal state prerogative with respect to education under White control, even in the face of fundamental violations of federal law; and one that assumed maximal federal authority with respect to education for subjugation of Native Americans, even including a distinct federal system of schools.

Federal education policy in the aftermath of the Civil War thus demonstrates the fundamental contingency of history. For a 20-year period following the Civil War, the possibilities of equal citizenship and citizenship education for African Americans seemed open. The potential for plural sovereignty for Native education also persisted. At the end of the 1880s, however, both windows of opportunity closed. They remained so for another 50 to 80 years. Those consequential collective choices have had legacies that cannot be undone. They foreclosed alternative realities that cannot be recaptured. To confront that history is to share recognition of that loss. It is also to realize how collective choice matters in our own time. In this way, history as civic reasoning is essential to the cultivation of civic agency.

### **Civic Education, Nationalism, and “Americanization” in the Early 20th Century: Lessons and Limits**

In the 19th century, schools promoted good citizenship through basic education in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history. An examination of textbooks in those subjects would quickly reveal a version of geography, history, and English language rhetoric that valorized White Anglo-Saxon Protestant political institutions, religious traditions, and economies as superior (Stratton, 2016). Nonetheless, that emphasis was more a general reflection of dominant prejudices than the product of an orchestrated plan to promote a singular vision or catechism of “American” ideals. By comparison, versions of civic education developed in the early 20th century became more deliberately nationalist, and hence more contested.

Immigration, labor conflict, and World War I shaped this shift in the content and aims of civic education. After 1890, U.S. corporate agriculture and industry significantly expanded their recruitment of displaced and laboring populations from around the world—including Japan, Eastern and Southern Europe, and Mexico. In this context, an array of federated nongovernmental organizations developed to address immigrant issues. Different organizations represented different views about immigrants and immigration. Some ethnic, religious, and mutual benefit societies such as the Knights of Columbus and various Jewish Federations offered immigration services for newcomers with whom their members shared a common identity. Other groups like settlement houses and the YMCA sought to address immigrant issues as matters of social welfare, including child labor, housing, public health, youth education, and recreation. Explicitly nationalist organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, sought to initiate youth into certain patriotic rituals and ideas of American history. More nativist organizations, meanwhile, such as the American Protective League, the Immigration Restriction League, and the Ku Klux Klan sought to restrict the rights of immigrants and the criteria for immigration and naturalization. These

diverse views came to a head in the 1910s and 1920s, especially with U.S. entry into World War I (Mirel, 2010).

Although the U.S. government had traditionally exercised little direct authority with respect to education in the states, officials in the Department of Labor and the Bureau of Education in the Department of the Interior began implementing “Americanization” policies indirectly in 1914 and 1915. In doing so, they followed a model of “hidden” government long pursued at the federal level, especially with respect to education (Beadie, 2019c; Steffes, 2012). Specifically in 1915, the Bureau of Education established a Division of Immigrant Education in close cooperation with a nongovernmental organization that became the National Americanization Committee (NAC). The NAC aimed to coordinate the various Americanization and immigrant service activities of chambers of commerce, corporations, patriotic societies, fraternal orders, and educational institutions at local and national levels. Meanwhile, in 1914, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Naturalization began working with public schools in certain cities to sponsor citizenship education. In 1916, in the context of war preparedness, Congress established a Council of National Defense and commissioned it, among other things, to work with state-level defense councils on war information and Americanization. Once the United States entered World War I in 1917, those councils became involved with activities of the War Industries Board, focusing, for example, on rooting out labor “radicalism” and “alien sedition” (Van Nuys, 2002, pp. 33–69).

Educators, for their part, variously created, participated in, and responded to these demands for explicit Americanization. Many progressive educators of the 1890s and early 1900s—for example, Jane Addams, Ella Flagg Young, and John Dewey—were “internationalists” who—though not without racial prejudices of their own—nonetheless favored pluralist approaches to education, and tended toward pacifism. By the mid-1910s, however, schools came under increasing pressure to adopt more explicit “Americanization” policies and practices. Among the practices widely adopted in response to such pressures were English-only instruction; daily flag salutes; pledges of American allegiance and loyalty; explicitly nationalistic textbooks in American and state history; and an extra-curriculum of (usually sex-segregated) clubs that made membership dependent on the exhibition of certain kinds of behavior, beliefs, and personal characteristics (Fallace, 2015; Tyack et al., 1987, pp. 154–176).

Still, education for citizenship continued to take multiple and various forms across time, and sometimes simultaneously. In Los Angeles, for example, according to Zevi Gutfreund’s account, public schools variously promoted five different models of Americanization from 1910 to 1940. The first model, rooted in the settlement house movement’s work with the families of immigrant laborers, pursued a broad approach to Americanization that included women as well as men, and adults as well as children. This model relied primarily on White women teachers and social welfare workers who visited immigrant laborer families to teach English language skills and social norms, with an emphasis on maternalist notions of housekeeping, health, and hygiene. As in many other cities and states, these networks of women teachers and social reformers lobbied successfully at both district and state levels for funding to make their version of home-based settlement work an official responsibility of public schools, resulting in passage of California’s Home Teacher Act of 1915 (Gutfreund, 2017; Raftery, 1992).

A second model, rooted more in the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization, focused more narrowly on education of immigrant adults for naturalized citizenship. Founded in 1912, the program focused almost exclusively on European immigrants, especially after the passage of the 1917 and 1924 immigration acts, which reinforced Asian exclusion. Identifying its target audience as “foreign born White men and women of voting age,” the program also largely excluded Mexican immigrants (Gutfreund, 2017, p. 16). In fact, leaders of the program and within the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization actively coordinated with nativist political groups in the state of California seeking revisions of federal law that would exclude Mexican immigrants from naturalization as well (Molina, 2014).

Partly in response to these exclusions and to the nativism apparent in much Americanization programming in the early 20th century, Japanese and Mexican communities developed their own approaches to language learning, acculturation, and citizenship education. Those included Japanese language schools and Mexican consulate schools (Asato, 2006). The first Japanese language schools emerged in Hawaii in the 1890s and in California and Washington State in 1902, becoming widespread on the Pacific Coast by the 1920s. Conceived from the start as supplemental to public schools, they provided instruction that paralleled and responded to Americanization, including lessons in Japanese language, history, culture, and moral training. Similarly, Mexican consulate schools, founded in the 1920s and modeled in part on Japanese and Hebrew language schools, taught Spanish language and Mexican history and culture in a supplementary, afterschool format. Ethnic educational institutions such as these effectively offered a notion of citizenship and civic education that was not singular or exclusive, but potentially multicultural and multinational, with multilingual students potentially serving as bridges of transnational understanding (Sanchez, 1993, pp. 108–125).

Finally, the fifth model identified by Gutfreund, which he ascribes largely to teachers and students themselves, represented yet another vision of civic education in the form of “World Citizenship” clubs in the 1920s and 1930s. Modeled in some ways on the League of Nations, the clubs celebrated diverse membership and focused on learning about other nations and cultures of the world through study, but also through visits from consulate officers or travelers with experience in other countries and familiarity with current international events. This shift in some Los Angeles schools reflects broader shifts from the loyalty-focused programs of the World War I period to more intercultural models of the 1920s and 1930s (Selig, 2008). At the same time, as Gutfreund points out, intercultural models of citizenship education thrived most prominently in the few schools and neighborhoods with truly diverse populations at a time of increasing local and federally reinforced ethnic and racial segregation.

Beyond organizing and implementing particular programs of Americanization in schools, educators also occasionally asserted leadership in the civic education of the broader public. In 1924, for example, the principal and teachers of at least one elementary school in Seattle with a historically diverse population deliberately chose to cast a Japanese American boy in the role of George Washington in the annual President’s Day school play, itself probably an artifact of Americanization programming. The school staff also actively and publicly defended their choice in the face of the considerable White backlash that followed. Interestingly, this casting decision occurred in 1924, the year that the highly restrictive Johnson–Reed Immigration Act passed, with Washington



State's Albert Johnson its lead sponsor. It is likely that educators acted in part to address that context. As conceived by these educators and leaders, civic education was not merely a matter of socializing newcomers to existing norms. It was about challenging students, parents, and dominant society to re-examine exclusionary assumptions and practices, thereby educating the public at large (Lee, 2011, pp. 105–141).

The Seattle school district provides other examples of this kind as well. They include the District Superintendent's resistance to adoption of the daily flag ritual promoted by the Daughters of the American Revolution in the 1910s. They also include explicit lessons about civic equality on the eve of U.S. entry into World War II. In 1941–1942, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and on the eve of Japanese American internment, several principals chose to hold school assemblies on the subjects of interethnic friendship and tolerance (Nelson, 1988; Pak, 2002). It should be noted, however, that these examples of resistance to nativism and affirmation of civil rights seem to have been most explicitly taught at schools with large non-White or ethnically diverse populations. Evidence suggests little comparable programming at the vast majority of schools in the city that were predominantly White. In other words, the notion of civic equality supposedly represented by the U.S. model of government seems to have been *least taught where it was most needed*, that is, in the segregated schools of White middle class students. This reality of race and class segregation continues to limit the potential of civic education today.

### **Creating an Anti-Racist Civic Education: Advancement and Backlash**

The crisis of World War II made it possible for teachers to critically investigate problems of American democracy in the classroom. Spurred by a global war that pitted brutal fascist regimes against American ideals of democracy and “fair play,” civic education expanded to include a new expectation—racial and religious tolerance, an ideal that evolved through the changing contexts of the postwar and emerging Cold War eras. At the heart of this movement was the nation's first explicitly anti-racist pedagogy.

At the outbreak of World War II in 1939, Americans tended to be both racist and anti-Semitic and Whites used the power of the law, judiciary, and the police to enforce racial inequality (Brilliant, 2010; Dudziak, 2011; Gordon, 2015; Marable, 2007; Myrdal, 1962; Southern, 1987; Sugrue, 2008). When reformers realized that Nazi racism and American White supremacy presented a dire threat to the war effort, they recognized a truly extraordinary educational challenge (Smedley & Smedley, 2018).

Anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University sought to battle American racism by changing the way that Americans understood the concept of race. A German-born Jew, Boas was the leading scientific authority on racial egalitarianism. He believed Americans were prejudiced because they did not know the scientific facts about human race. He asserted that accurate information would effectively reduce American prejudice, and that these lessons would be most effective with young people. The best way to reach large numbers of American youth with new scientific information was, of course, in public schools (Boas, 1941a, 1941b, 1941c; *Chicago Defender*, 1939; *The New York Times*, 1939); thus began an unprecedented anti-racist education campaign by Boas and other social scientists to combat false Nazi racial doctrines through American K–12

schools, an effort that ultimately transformed the function and purpose of civic education (Burkholder, 2011).

The movement took off when it became clear that the war was destabilizing race relations at home. As *The New York Times* reported, "The tense atmosphere created in the world at large is reflected in the classroom. The pupils, reading the newspapers and hearing it discussed at home, are aware of the ill feeling between the Jews and the Germans, the Chinese and the Japanese, and other nationalistic groups" (Fine, 1938, p. 46; see also Baker, 2010; Barkan, 1992; Selig, 2008; Williams, 2006).

Teachers seized the opportunity to nurture patriotism and support the war effort. During the 1930s, many schools had adopted an approach to civic education promoted by the NEA known as the "Problems of Democracy" course (Dorn, 2007; Fallace, 2016). A central idea of this approach was that students should conduct their own investigations of public policy issues in dialogue with each other. In certain contexts, such as diverse urban districts of the North and Black urban high schools in the South, curriculum leaders and teachers pursued this approach by examining contemporary issues of race and race relations. Many of them understood this work as being civic in nature, as it was intended to bolster and protect democratic norms. As one extolled, "Now that the daily headlines have invaded the American classroom with reports of national rivalry and race hatred, we should not barricade ourselves behind routine dictionary work but launch a counterattack for the coming victory of democracy." A rash of new textbooks, teacher training programs, and intercultural curricula helped educators understand that human diversity resulted from learned cultural differences, not innate racial ones (Anonymous, 1952; Bellafiore, 1941; Giordano, 2004; Pak, 2002).

In a curriculum developed primarily with reference to northern Whites, anthropologist Ruth Benedict authored teaching materials so that educators could explain scientific concepts of race and culture to American youth. In 1946 she published *Racism Is Vulnerable*, writing, "English teachers have a strategic position in helping to create a new world able to free itself from the curse of racism." Building on Boas's work, Benedict asked teachers to do two things to "inoculate" children from racism and fortify democracy. First, they needed to talk about race in scientifically accurate and egalitarian terms. She cautioned that the goal was not to "make everybody 'love' everybody else," but instead to learn to judge people as individuals, without reference to racial identity or national origin. Second, she believed teachers could expand children's worldviews by using literature to introduce cultural relativity, or the idea that all cultures were of equal worth. She wrote, "Good novels and plays and poems are generally better material on cultural conditioning, even for the serious anthropological student, than formal books on the 'American way' or the 'Italian people' or 'Poles'" (Benedict, 1946, p. 300). Benedict asked teachers to discuss how ingrained assumptions about etiquette, cleanliness, and family relations created biases, and encouraged teachers to discuss how minorities in America lived differently than the White majority because of cultural differences, not racial ones (Benedict, 1942a, 1942b, 1946, 1948; Benedict & Weltfish, 1943).

Under the extraordinary pressure of war, it became more common for White teachers to introduce texts by and about African Americans, Chinese Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans with the explicit goal of combatting racism. Black teachers, mostly restricted to Black students in both the South and the North, had been

teaching “Negro history” for at least a decade, but wartime pressures to teach tolerance created an opportunity to expand these lessons.

Citizenship education now required instruction in the science of racial egalitarianism and the history and culture of minority groups. In many areas of the country, teachers compelled their young charges to study the science of race, sing “Negro” spirituals, talk to Native Americans and Chinese Americans, read novels about the immigrant experience, and research their own family’s ethnic heritage. Students at all grade levels put on plays, read poetry, studied local race relations, and sampled food from around the world all for the purpose of learning racial tolerance and cultural appreciation in order to be better democratic citizens (Burkholder, 2011).

Black teachers expanded lessons on Negro history, racial equality, and race pride inside of all-Black schools (Burkholder, 2012; Dagbovie, 2007). As college professor Merl Eppse put it, teaching “Negro History” was at times “like sitting on a ton of dynamite” in the Jim Crow South. Echoing anthropologists, Eppse suggested that Black educators had a special role to play, writing, “If prejudice is based on misunderstanding, then it is the Negro’s duty to be armed with facts and attitudes to show the prejudiced person the other side of the controversy” (Eppse, 1938). The president of the Virginia Teachers Association agreed: “the Negro teacher not only can conscientiously but should wholeheartedly share in the current rise of Americanism. We cannot inculcate in our pupils too great love for the American principles of religious freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of assembly” (*VTA Bulletin*, 1939, p. 2).

Black educators insisted that racism could be transcended through effective classroom instruction, thus lending their voices and ideas to the expanding anti-racist education movement. “The false smoke screens that have been made to place Negro Americans in a derogatory position can be removed through the process of education,” wrote Chicago teacher Madeline Morgan (Morgan, 1944, p. 7). From Virginia, Flora Basset added, “All America is not blind to the fact that democracy does not sanction race superiority, as a few mis-educated people would have us believe” (Bassett, 1940).

Over the course of World War II, expressions of racial prejudice would be labeled as ignorant and uneducated. In contrast, knowledgeable democratic citizens were expected to be tolerant of diversity and reject claims of racial superiority. As the *Negro History Bulletin* reported in 1943,

Among the youth of both races in the South it is considered evidence of scholarship to be able to say that they have studied the Negro scientifically and can speak intelligently on the background and present status of the race. Those who once prided themselves of considering any thought of the Negro as beneath their notice are now classified as the ignorant and backward members of the community. (*Negro History Bulletin*, 1943, p. 164)

Writing from Missouri, Black educator James Scott added

Another lesson which we as a nation should learn from the experiences of this war is the disastrous consequences of racism. We are now witnessing in the case of Hitlerite Germany a dramatic demonstration of the fact that in a world of many races adherence to a doctrine of ruthless racism is as suicidal as adherence to a doctrine of ruthless individualism would be in a society composed of many individuals. (Scott, 1944, p. 8)

By contextualizing the American battle against White supremacy as part of the global struggle against fascism, Black teachers created bold new lessons during the height of Jim Crow. This explains why teachers like Julia Brogdon in Charleston could ask Black high school students to write letters to White college presidents challenging discriminatory admissions practices and calling on them to embrace democratic ideals. Black educators situated this work in long traditions of Black political and educational activism, but the War and the example of Nazi racial totalitarianism gave their work a new sense of moral urgency and authority.

At first, the conclusion of World War II made anti-racist education more important than ever. As one educator put it, "In the face of the intergroup tensions that disturb the peace of our schools, communities, and country, what shall we regard as the necessary qualities of a good citizen for public education? How shall he act when faced with a problem involving racial or religious prejudice? How can we educate our children for participation as good citizens in the typical mixed community?" (Cole et al., 1946, p. 3). A small but vocal number of educators insisted the time was ripe to eradicate racism through classroom instruction. A truly effective postwar civic education would have to consider "American ideals and American practices in housing, in education, in employment, [and] in political rights" (Smiley, 1946, p. 339; see also Cole et al., 1946; Quillen, 1945; Spaulding, 1951; Van Til, 1945). A Black teacher from Virginia noted,

Because bias, prejudice, and discrimination come only through learning, the public is becoming aware of a need for a preventative and remedial type of intercultural education. The public naturally looks to the school as the chief agency to correct many evils. In order to be well informed, intelligent, and worthy citizens, all children regardless of the color of their skin have to be taught to live well together. (Lewis, 1954, p. 113)

In 1946, a Teachers College professor surveyed K–12 teachers, asking, "What are American boys and girls learning of sound attitudes toward relations between Christian and Jew, Negro and White man, 'old American' and those more recently come to America? What are they learning about the American way of life?" In response, dozens of teachers described civic curricula stretched out over weeks or even months. Many moved from discussions of the Nazi persecution of Jews to discrimination against African Americans at home. Students responded to prompts like, "What Is Democracy?" and "What America Means to Me." One teacher explained,

Readings on race, culture, prejudice, and American constitutional freedoms, and reports on outstanding members of minority groups and on community housing projects for Negroes followed. The unit closed with a 'Town Meeting' re-examining, in the light of knowledge and insight gained during the month, the topic "To Get the Kind of World We Want"—a world in which American institutions would be in harmony with American ideals. (Smiley, 1946, p. 340)

After the War, the social context for these lessons shifted quickly (Burkholder, 2011). Within 2 years administrators pressured teachers to scale back lessons that examined the science of racial equality or the blatant inequalities of American democracy. In the emerging McCarthy era one of the markers for communism was whether an individual supported racial equality, and teachers as public employees faced close scrutiny

(Fallace, 2018; Hartman, 2008; Taylor, 2011). As one social studies teacher wrote in 1952, “The atmosphere of fear and uncertainty has penetrated all strata of the system, not only the teaching ranks, but as high as the new Board and as low as the staff employees. None are certain, none are secure” (Anonymous, 1952). The teacher noted that colleagues had abandoned lessons on racial equality and the United Nations. “Once, free discussion of controversial political issues was permitted, even encouraged. Now, for the probationary teacher, such a discussion is tantamount to declining tenure” (Serviss, 1953). *The New York Times* reported, “Many educators and publishers are worried as they see censorship and attack becoming more widespread each day” (Fine, 1953).

Thus, even as the Civil Rights movement entered what some have called its “classical” phase marked by the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, countervailing movements attacked and undermined anti-racist pedagogy and activism, both directly and indirectly. During World War II, in 1942, the U.S. federal government had rounded up tens of thousands of residents of Japanese ancestry, most of them U.S.-born citizens, and incarcerated them in concentration camps based on a long history of racist Asian exclusion. At the same time, the Federal Bureau of Investigation created files on academics of color who worked on race issues, including the leading Black intellectual, scholar, and activist W. E. B. Du Bois. Immediately after the War, in 1947, leading White academics like the Harvard-based historian Arthur Schlesinger labeled the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People a “communist organization,” an act that aided White southern state governments in the political persecution of educators at all levels who participated in the civil rights movement (Lewis, 1994; Morris, 2015; Urban, 1992; Williamson-Lott, 2018). Explicit anti-racist education retreated after 1948. In this new context, teachers faced a new dilemma: how to promote racial egalitarianism without talking about the science of race or racial injustice. In response, teachers developed a colorblind approach to civic education. This embodied the ideal that scientists like Boas and Benedict had articulated—teachers and students would judge everyone as an individual without reference to racial or national identity, but left enduring legacies of racism largely untouched. Although it is commendable that some teachers opposed racial prejudice, it is also clear that this colorblind pedagogy masked racial oppression and did little to dismantle student biases or help them understand how the larger structures of social injustice violated democratic ideals (Burkholder, 2011, pp. 168–170; Gordon, 2015).

The way in which McCarthyism became intertwined with White supremacy after World War II—suppressing Black teachers, professionals, and academics in particular, and transforming anti-racism work more generally—is a lesson in the simultaneity of opposing movements in history. That reality in turn contradicts popular American assumptions of “progress” as the inevitable direction of historical change. With respect to the Civil Rights movement specifically, the historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (2005) warned that just as the movement to recover and realize Black civil rights had a long historical trajectory, so did the “so-called backlash against it.” At the same time as anti-racist pedagogy and Black civic education gained momentum in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, the U.S. government also enforced New Deal housing, home loan, transportation, and relief policies that actively constructed a racial apartheid in American cities and agricultural districts (Donato, 2007; Erickson, 2016; Erickson & Highsmith, 2018; Rothstein, 2017). As we are being reminded now, efforts to combat false presumptions



of White supremacy are never safely in the past, but ongoing historical trajectories that we are part of as actors in history, one way or another. It is up to us to decide what kind of historical agents we want to be.

### **Struggles for Self-Determination in the Civil Rights Era: Toward Pluralist Visions of Civic Education**

African American and Mexican American educational activists challenged educational discrimination in movements that dated back to the common school era. Beginning in the 1920s, civil rights organizations representing African Americans and Mexican Americans executed a series of successful legal campaigns against segregated public schools (Tushnet, 1987; Valencia, 2008). These legal attacks culminated in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, which profoundly altered the relationship between public schools and citizenship education. Even if the physical facilities and other “tangible” factors of White and “colored” schools were equal, the Court reasoned, segregating Black students on the basis of racial identity violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment.

The U.S. Supreme Court determined that public schools had a duty to prepare all youth for citizenship and that this could only be accomplished in desegregated schools. Identifying public education as “perhaps the most important function of state and local governments,” Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote,

Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. It is required in the performance of our most basic public responsibilities, even service in the armed forces. It is the very foundation of good citizenship. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, p. 493)

This education included awakening children to American values, preparing them for professional training, and helping them adjust normally to their environment. “In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education,” Warren concluded; “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, p. 495).

School desegregation was a contested policy, but the idea that integrated schools were the “very foundation of good citizenship” persisted, echoing claims by Frederick Douglass and other Black educational activists over the previous century. Both Douglass and Warren recognized that mixed schools were a powerful symbol of equal citizenship, and that, in contrast, segregated schools institutionalized White supremacy and violated the democratic ideal. Many Black educational activists had advocated for school integration since the 1840s, but after World War II the vast majority of Black citizens refused to countenance the insult of state-sponsored discrimination (Bell, 1980; Klarman, 2007; Kluger, 2004; Minow, 2010; Ogletree, 2004; Patterson, 2001). The *Brown* ruling affirmed the relationship between school integration and equal citizenship and marked the start of a sweeping Second Reconstruction where the federal government enforced the civil rights of African Americans (Bunche, 1951, pp. 215–216; Marable, 2007).

The Black civil rights movement intersected with long-term struggles for educational equality by other marginalized groups, including Puerto Ricans and Mexican

Americans. Mexican American families and organizations had been fighting their own battles against illegal school segregation in California and elsewhere in the Southwest since the 1910s. A series of cases in Arizona, California, Colorado, and Texas, including *Romo v. Laird* (1925), *Del Rio Independent School District v. Salvierra* (1930), and *Roberto Alvarez v. the Board of Trustees of the Lemon Grove School District* (1931) resulted in crucial victories. The historic *Mendez v. Westminster* case in 1947 established a legal precedent for *Brown* by finding the segregation of Mexican American students in California to be illegal, and *Delgado v. Bastrop Independent School District* (1948) reached a similar decision in Texas. Latinx educational activism evolved in the postwar era alongside the rising militancy of the Mexican American and Puerto Rican civil rights movements (Behnkin, 2011; Bernstein, 2011; Blanton, 2014; Brilliant, 2010; Donato et al., 2016; García, 2018; Gonzalez, 2013; Lee, 2014; McDonald, 2004; Morales, 2018; Muñoz, 2011; Ortiz, 2018; Powers, 2008; Sanchez, 1993; Strum, 2010).

In the early 1960s, Latinxs launched a renewed offensive against exclusionary, discriminatory, and subtractive practices in the public schools. This movement unfolded among Puerto Rican communities in the Northeast and Mexican American communities in the Southwest. All demanded the right to cultural and political self-determination in education, a demand that was distinct from the struggle for integration.

Movements for self-determination in education by Latinxs and other minority groups reshaped the civic function of public education. For more than a century, schools had pushed a deliberately assimilationist agenda designed to compel immigrants and racial minorities to conform to White, middle-class, Protestant norms (Beadie et al., 2017; Kliebard, 2004; Mirel, 2010; Molina, 2014; Noboa-Rios, 2019; Selig, 2011). Teachers unapologetically emphasized “lessons in English and patriotism” in order to “weld the many peoples of any community into one body politic and create throughout the nation the unity and power that come from common ideals, a common language, and a uniform interpretation of citizenship” (Cody, 1918).

Compulsory lessons on English language and patriotism, long contested by Mexican American and Puerto Rican communities, came under new scrutiny in the civil rights era (Farber, 1970; San Miguel, 2013; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Valencia, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). In a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* in 1963, John F. Mendez explained, “The Mexican community is not concerned with ‘integration’ or ‘assimilation,’ but with ‘bi-culturalism.’ We very definitely would like to retain the best of the Mexican culture and also the best of the Anglo-Saxon culture.” He concluded, “I honestly believe this would make the Mexican-American a better citizen of his community and country” (Mendez, 1963).<sup>6</sup>

Latinx educational activists agreed that the public schools played a key role in fortifying American democracy and preparing good citizens, but rejected discriminatory practices including forced assimilation. Puerto Ricans complained they were “treated as inferior” by teachers in New York and other cities, where Anglo teachers looked down on students who spoke Spanish (Kihss, 1964, p. 1). Interviews with

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<sup>6</sup> In 1971, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights documented “slightly more than 2 million Spanish sur-named pupils” in American public schools, or 4.6 percent of the total enrollment. Approximately 1.4 million, or 70 percent, attended public schools in the five Southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. See U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (1971a). *Report I: Ethnic isolation of Mexican Americans in the public schools of the southwest*. U.S. Government Printing Office.

teachers and school administrators revealed these sentiments were not misplaced. As one elementary teacher explained, "The Spanish that these little Mexican kids know is just a poor combination of English and Spanish slang. Actually, these kids have no language at all, because they speak bad English and bad Spanish." A principal reported that "We try to discourage the use of Spanish on the playground, in the halls, and in the classrooms" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1972, pp. 19–20). An Anglo school leader in Texas added, "I think they [Mexican Americans] want to learn English. And I think that they want to be full Americans. And since English is the language of America, I believe that they want to learn English" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1974, pp. 3–5). Latinx students resented these bigoted assumptions and demeaning practices. "Schools try to brainwash Chicanos," complained one. "They try to make us forget our history, to be ashamed of being Mexicans, of being Spanish. They succeed in making us feel empty, and angry inside" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1972, p. 3).

Anglo educators punished Mexican American children for speaking Spanish with fines, spankings, and standing in the corner, among other humiliations. These rules applied not only in classrooms, but in the hallways, on the playground, and in the cafeteria. One student recalled, "When I was in elementary school they had a rule not to speak Spanish but we all did. If you got caught speaking Spanish you were to write three pages saying, 'I must not speak Spanish in school'" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1972, p. 18). The stated purpose of these rules was not to torment Spanish speaking children, but to encourage them to learn English and assimilate as quickly as possible. Teachers viewed English language proficiency and adjustment to dominant White cultural norms as essential components of citizenship. Accordingly, in 1971 the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that "grades given to Mexican American students in citizenship subjects such as 'work habits' and 'cooperation' were consistently lower than those given to non-Mexicans" (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1971b, p. 40).

Anglo school leaders resisted Latinx demands for educational reform until finally students forced the issue. In March 1968, Mexican American students at Los Angeles's Lincoln High School organized a massive school boycott. Marking "the beginning of a revolution," thousands of Mexican American students in East Los Angeles walked out of school to protest English-only language policies, discriminatory IQ testing, racist teachers, a White-washed curriculum, and the lack of Mexican American teachers and guidance counselors (Torgerson, 1968, p. B1).

The 1968 East Los Angeles "blowouts" represented a new and more radical youth-based educational activism. As part of the Chicano movement, these young activists took pride in their "brown" racial identity and scorned assimilation in favor of pride in *la raza*. School strikes, speeches, demands, picketing, and sit-ins spread from school to school. Students demanded more respectful teachers, the right to speak Spanish, the opportunity to study Mexican history, more Mexican American teachers and administrators, bilingual education, and increased student rights (Bernal, 1997; Briegel, 1974; Garcia & Castro, 2011; Petrzela, 2015, pp. 39–68; Rosales, 1997, pp. 175–195; San Miguel, 2013, pp. 24–32). Echoing cries of "Chicano Power," school blowouts erupted in Denver, Chicago, and in dozens of towns and cities in Texas in the late 1960s. Puerto Rican activists in cities like New York, Boston, and Springfield, Massachusetts made similar demands for educational equality, often working together with African American

activists to generate meaningful reforms. These movements gained national attention and alerted Americans to the dilemmas and concerns of Spanish speaking students (Garcia, 2015, pp. 25–27; Massachusetts State Advisory Committee, 1972; Navarro, 1998; San Miguel, 2001, 2013).

In 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Bilingual Education Act into law, encouraging “new and imaginative programs” to aid students with limited English language proficiency. Although modest in scope, it signaled the federal government’s rejection of English-only laws and provided federal funds to support English language learners. Six years later, the Supreme Court in *Lau v. Nichols* strengthened federal support for bilingual education. For many Latinx citizens, bilingual education signaled a more inclusive form of citizenship education. As New York’s first Puerto Rican Congressman Herman Badillo explained, “Second-class status must no longer be imposed on those persons who do not speak English and we must not prevent such persons from sharing in the rights and privileges of citizenship. We exist in a multilingual and multicultural environment and all segments of the community must be afforded full respect and equal participation” (Pasquariello, 1973, pp. 27–43).

Concurrently, Native Americans also fought for a more pluralist vision of education, seeking community control of schools in both traditional public schools and federally run reservation schools. A growing number of Native American college and graduate students pursued education degrees so that they could work as teachers in their own communities. In 1972 the Indian Education Act provided federal funding for Indigenous bilingual and bicultural education materials development, teacher preparation, and parent involvement in schools. Even more importantly, 3 years later, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act empowered Native American communities to operate their own schools and social services. This offered the first opportunity for Native communities to control their own schools in a way comparable to the control exercised by some Nations in Indian Territory in the 1840s and 1850s before the Civil War. The era saw a tremendous growth in Indigenous-controlled schools, like the Rough Rock Demonstration School in Chinle, Arizona, that emphasized Navajo language and culture in the school’s curriculum and pedagogy. By 1970, there were 34 Indigenous-controlled schools with bilingual and bicultural approaches to empowering Native youth, though together these schools enrolled only a fraction of all Native children (Lomawaima, 1994; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, pp. 114–133; McCarty, 2010).

Many African American educational activists in the North also expressed an interest in community-controlled schools in the late 1960s. Supporters wanted Black parents to make key decisions related to curriculum and instruction, teacher hiring, community relations, finances, and administration (Erickson & Morrell, 2019; Rickford, 2016). This movement built on a long tradition of separate, Black-controlled schools known for training generations of leaders, including the historically Black colleges and universities (Anderson, 1988; Baker, 2006; Cecelski, 1994; Favors, 2019; Green, 2016; Walker, 1996). A community-controlled public school experiment in New York City put this reform to the test in 1968, to mixed results. Frustrated by the limitations of community control within the public schools, hundreds of Black families abandoned public schools to attend independent, Afrocentric schools (Perlstein, 2004; Podair, 2002; Rickford, 2016; Taylor, 1997, pp. 176–207).

Meanwhile, these experiments with Black community control in the urban North occurred just as many southern African American communities lost influence over their schools in the wake of school desegregation. Although many African American leaders and youth had agitated over decades for school equalization and eventual desegregation through a combination of social protest, political activism, and legal action, in the end southern White politicians and administrators retained control over many aspects of implementation. As a result, many Black schools closed, tens of thousands of Black educators lost their jobs, and most Black parents found themselves significantly alienated—if not outright excluded—from the schools their children attended (Baker, 2006; Cecelski, 1994; Fultz, 2004; Walker, 1996). Many displaced teachers and educators in turn migrated to expanding Black urban communities in the North and West. Some pursued new careers in federal service, including as teachers with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which offered some federal benefits and guarantees of non-discrimination, and actively recruited them after World War II. As documented by Kahlil Anthony Johnson (2016, 2018), this historical migration to reservation and off-reservation schools in the era of self-determination marked a strange inverted echo of earlier historical moments when Blacks and Indigenous peoples interacted in colonial institutions and contexts. In this new historical moment, Black teachers played dual and perhaps conflicted roles in Natives' own efforts to realize community-controlled schools.

These overlapping movements for community control of public education in the late 1960s emphasized Black, Indigenous, and Latinx families as powerful agents of educational reform. Elected representatives and school leaders began to make substantial changes to educational theory and practice. Over the next two decades, bilingual education was strengthened through key court rulings, executive actions, and vocal Native American, Chinese American, and Latinx educational activism (San Miguel, 2004). Although bilingual education programs eventually drew the wrath of conservatives, they thrived and eventually contributed to a more plural vision of civic education (Banks, 1996; Hartman, 2019a, pp. 200–221; Jefferson, 1979; Petrzela, 2015, pp. 19–38).

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Current Context and Demands to Confront History

On June 7, 2020, an interracial group of high school students in Montclair, New Jersey, organized a protest to affirm that Black Lives Matter in schools and the broader community. More than 4,000 students and families showed up in support of the students' demands to make the local public schools more fair and equitable for Black students. They listened to Black students at Montclair High School describe the pain they suffered at this high-performing, integrated high school, and demanded desegregated classrooms, a more diverse faculty, and an explicitly anti-racist curriculum (Martin, 2020).

The Black Lives Matter at School rally in Montclair was part of a global movement protesting the violent murder of George Floyd, a Black man in Minneapolis, by a White police officer. These grassroots social movements seek to identify and challenge systemic racism not only in policing and public education, but also in virtually every other area of social and political life, including health care disparities laid bare by the coronavirus, which disproportionately affects communities of color (Burch et al., 2020; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020).



In many ways, the current context of protest and challenge is a moment of hope. Speaking at a virtual town hall meeting in support of Black Lives Matter, former President Barack Obama explained,

in some ways, as tragic as these past few weeks have been, as difficult and scary and uncertain as they've been, they've also been an incredible opportunity for people to be awakened to some of these underlying trends. And they offer an opportunity for us to all work together, to tackle them, to take them on, to change America and make it live up to its highest ideals. (Obama, 2020)

At the same time, protesters demand a confrontation with history. Such a confrontation is arguably necessary in order to reimagine and reconstitute the “we” that makes civic discourse and reasoning possible. The National Academy of Education civic reasoning and discourse project seeks to awaken Americans to the long history of systemic racism and inequality and to help the United States live up to its highest democratic ideals. A history of civic education in the United States reveals strategies to remake public schools as potent sites of democracy building and community empowerment that ensure civil rights for all. What follows are some reflections on the lessons of history for the future of civic education in the United States.

### **Learning from the Past**

Fortunately, history provides a repertoire of examples to draw on in pursuing the project of revitalizing civic education. Educators in the past have stepped forward both within and beyond the classroom to play roles in the civic education of youth and the public at large. They have challenged common narratives and assumptions about who is and should be included in the American story. They have created public lessons designed to help students, teachers, and members of the public to recognize and articulate principles of tolerance, due process, and equal citizenship. They have challenged Americans regarding their treatment of immigrants, their ideas about race, and their violations of Native sovereignty and principles of federalism. They have led teachers and students in protesting totalitarian structures at home as well as abroad. They have helped communities take charge of their schools and their children's education. We can learn from their strategies and experiences.

Even as we draw on a repertoire of past examples of civic education, however, we must also think through important issues of context in our own time. How well we think through those issues of context will shape the consequences and significance of any actions we take now. For example, we must consider how we construct the purpose and constituencies of civic education and the effect of those conceptualizations for who is recognized as having rights and who is included in our vision of the public. Knowing that the idea of “education for citizenship” allowed leaders of the early republic to ignore the schooling of women and African Americans and narrow their vision of civic education to White males, we must consider how far our vision of civic education encompasses all “persons,” including both the powerful and the powerless, the undocumented and the homeless, not just the citizen and the taxpayer.

Similarly, we must consider how the problem of consensus will shape civic education in our time. Knowing that the challenge of maintaining a confederation of states

in the face of foreign threats and internal rebellion led leaders to sacrifice Native sovereignty, the rights of African Americans, and the U.S. Constitution during Indian removal and Jim Crow, we must consider how far civic education will challenge dominant narratives even in the face of resistance. More fundamentally, we must consider at what scale or level of government we promote the goals and negotiate the content of civic education. How will we recognize plural sovereignty without sacrificing the principle of equal recognition and participation in civic discourse and reasoning? Correspondingly, we must consider the simultaneity of advancement and backlash in the promotion of civic education and civil rights. Knowing that anti-racist educators in the North and Black educators in the South developed their most creative lessons challenging racist ideas and structures of education and access even as new federal policies further institutionalized racial segregation in housing, education, and welfare, we must be aware that new racial structures are likely to take form even as—or because—old ones are destabilized. How do we develop the capacity for continued engagement with such systemic injustices?

Cultivating civic agency is a crucial component of civic education. To be effective citizens we must *understand where we are in history, understand ourselves as historical agents, and believe that engagement matters*. When Peter Pitchlynn of the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory successfully took the fight for Native control of tribal school funds to Washington, DC, in 1842, he understood himself as an agent of his tribe's General Council involved in a broad project of nation-building for his own tribe and more broadly, for all of the Nations in Indian Territory. In 1944, when Julia Brogdan designed a lesson at the Avery Institute that led the students in her "Problems of Democracy" class to challenge racial exclusion at the municipally owned College of Charleston, she understood herself as an educator working in a multi-generational tradition of African American civic education reaching back to Reconstruction and before. At the same time, both Pitchlynn and Brogdan understood that in confronting injustice, they were calling the United States back to its own constitutional principles. In this sense they acted as citizens even as the broader American society did not fully recognize that citizenship.

### **Looking to the Future: Four Recommendations**

#### *The Curriculum of Civic Education Must Confront History*

In order to re-imagine and reconstitute the "we" of civic discourse and reasoning, the curriculum of civic education must confront history. In the past, civic education has often functioned as a program of forced assimilation and violence against Native, Black, and Latinx communities. State-sponsored education for Native Americans was a component of settler colonialism aimed at the eradication of Native peoples and cultures to secure the material gain of their land and resources. Schools were part of this strategy, and later, the curriculum was part of this effort: American Indians were covered in the early colonial era, then removed from the story as if they ceased to exist—or vanished—from the land. In a similar vein, efforts to correct the racist portrayal of African Americans and Latinx in the curriculum have been only partially successful. A history of civic education shows that discrimination against students of color in American public schools is not an aberration or an accident, but instead is the

logical result of citizenship education in a nation founded on racialized slavery and settler colonialism. This history must be confronted.

Yet, history also shows that civic education has been contested, fraught with multiple meanings, and vulnerable to resistance, reform, transformation, and even sabotage. The intimate nature of schooling means that teachers like Julia Brogdan and scholars like Ruth Benedict have the power to awaken potentially revolutionary political thought in young people, and that students like those in Los Angeles can use civil disobedience, political pressure, and lawsuits to substantially improve educational equality. This history can help students understand themselves as historical agents. It must also be part of civic education.

#### *The Country Must Recommit to the Civic Purpose of Public Education*

A civic education renaissance will require more robust popular support for the civic function of public education, an ideal that has been lost in the current emphasis on high-stakes testing and college and career readiness. Following decades of neglect for the civic purposes of education, it is now apparent that a majority of Americans do not understand such foundational concepts as checks and balances and the salience of an independent judiciary. Public trust in government is only at 18 percent, and voter participation is at its lowest point since 1996. Scholars and educators need to persuade Americans that citizenship education is essential to bolstering democracy in the 21st century. An educated public, in turn, can support state laws mandating vigorous civic education, including not only courses in government and politics, but also courses that emphasize national and global struggles for human rights. Explicit instruction in U.S. government and politics helps students understand the constitutional framework of American governance, while studying historical examples of human rights violations serves as both a cautionary tale of what happens when democratic norms are violated, but also how everyday people have triumphed over brutal, state-sponsored regimes of tyranny and injustice. Today, only 12 states require public schools to teach about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, and only 4 require instruction in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender history. Without these kinds of laws in place, most teachers will skip what they see as difficult or controversial subjects. Once these state laws are passed, in contrast, universities and nonprofit organizations can offer professional development to augment classroom instruction, and teachers and administrators have more authority to teach inclusive histories that emphasize core democratic ideals (Anderson, 2019; Burkholder, 2019; Povich, 2019; Schwartz, 2019; Shapiro & Brown, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

#### *Teachers Must Be Supported to Lead Effective Civic Education*

To begin, fortifying civic education requires a massive infusion of resources to teach stronger and more effective history education in K–12 schools. History is a category of civic reasoning that helps people navigate the complexities of democratic citizenship. It is essential for civic reasoning because it engenders contextual thinking, requiring people to investigate *how* and *why* things happened in the past. This process, in turn, generates a more critically informed citizenry that understands how to think through

issues in context. Citizens that recognize how this process has worked historically are better positioned to dismantle educational inequalities in the present. This is especially imperative in the current moment when social media and false news stories have made it much more difficult for Americans to sort fact from fiction. Civic education must cultivate the skills of historical analysis, reflective inquiry, and critical thinking so that all of us can evaluate competing claims, deliberate with others, engage in civil dialogue, and advocate effectively for justice. More effective civic education means stronger and better history education, an objective that will require new approaches to teacher education and professional development (Fallace, 2016; Hartman, 2019b; Parker, 2019).

### *Civic Education Pedagogy Must Be Reimagined to Advance Racial Justice*

Twenty-first century civic education must offer meaningfully integrated curricula, pedagogy, and practice with the explicit objective of advancing racial justice. This means we must transform existing pedagogy and curricula by welcoming the voices and critiques of scholars and educators of color. Justin Krueger argues that settler colonial narratives are pervasive in social studies curriculum, writing, “There is a consistency to their delivery and presentation that creates clear lines of delineation concerning indigenous people and ‘actual’ Americans” (Krueger, 2019, pp. 294–295). U.S. history textbooks portray Native Americans in biased ways, for example, by disproportionately speaking of them in colonial and early American history, but failing to recognize their continued contributions in recent history and contemporary society, reinforcing the stereotype of a “vanished race.” Scholars have established that African Americans and Latinxs, likewise, are portrayed inaccurately in contemporary K–12 curricula (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Loewen, 2007; Ortiz, 2018; Takaki, 2008; Zimmerman, 2002; Zinn, 2015). Bettina Love argues that radical new pedagogies are necessary to achieve true equality. She writes, “Abolitionist teaching is the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice inside and outside of schools” (Love, 2019, p. 2).

The answer is not simply more African American, Native American, or Latinx history, but instead a smarter and more critical approach to teaching these essential components of U.S. history (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019). Indigenous scholars have developed a range of anti-colonial and anti-racist strategies designed to support self-determination, center Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems, and inspire Native American students. African American and Latinx scholars also have developed emancipatory curricula and pedagogy designed to advance liberation and racial justice. These programs have tremendous value for educators committed to reimagining civic education. This integrated approach must be delivered in racially, ethnically, and socio-economically mixed classrooms that treat all students, educators, and families equally. The astronomical rates of segregation and inequality in American public schools are inherently anti-democratic and unsustainable. They cement educational inequality into place and provide a terrifying object lesson in state-sponsored, institutionalized racism that takes place with either the tacit acceptance or active encouragement of those in power. This must change, as segregated and unequal public schools cannot function as sites of effective citizenship education in a modern democracy (Brayboy,

2005; Frankenberg et al., 2019; Locke & Lindley, 2007; Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006; Payne & Strickland, 2008; Steineker, 2019).

American public schools have always espoused civic education, but they have never successfully prepared all students to act as agents of history in realizing a more just and plural democracy. A historical analysis provides some suggestions on how to critically interpret civic education in the past so that we can reimagine a new kind of civic education for the future.

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