
Democracy & Education

Democracy Can Be Dangerous Work

The Story of Youthbuilders Civic Education Program 1938–1948

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Abstract

This article describes the work of a civic education program in New York City schools called Youthbuilders, which existed from 1938 to 1948. Youthbuilders' aim was to engage youth in civic education projects and teach them about their place in a democracy and worked with them to support racial and social equality. Shortly after World War II, they were attacked by a conservative Catholic organization that was working to eliminate groups associated with so-called Communist beliefs like social justice and racial equality. Youthbuilders shut their doors by 1948. The story is one that helps us understand the fragility of working for democracy and race equity in times of social anxiety.

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Introduction

MANN, REGARDED AS an early founder of public education in the United States, believed that universal education was necessary for citizens to function in a democracy. Beyond this very basic idea, there has not been agreement on what civic education should look like. Dewey famously put forth a notion of education for democracy and envisioned an education that prepared young people to live in the society in which they are a part (Dewey, 1916/1944). Dewey regarded a school as “a miniature community, an embryonic society” (Dewey, 1899/1959, p. 41) and described an ideal classroom in which students and teachers learned from each other through interaction on equal terms to be ready to live in a democratic society. In reality, civic education has been much more contested, reflecting competing desires for what citizens should be (Kliebard, 1995; Mirel, 2002).

In the early 20th century, for example, educators saw civic education largely as an assimilationist project, ensuring that new

immigrants spoke English and became patriotic (Cubberley, 1909; Mirel, 2002). By the time World War II was approaching, there was a broader conception of civic education, one in which cultural differences were celebrated. Mirel (2002) wrote:

In the Depression and into the start of World War II, educational leaders fashioned civic education as a crucial weapon. In developing that weapon, they focused on one of the sharpest differences between totalitarianism and democracy, how democratic governments and societies dealt with ethnic and religious minorities. (p. 149).

Consequently, civic education can reflect the shifting political and social contexts (Rubin, 2012). This paper examines one effort at civic education that was inspired by a combination of Deweyan principles of experiential education and a desire to cultivate

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democratic values in a context that was shifting from pre–World War II to postwar. Youthbuilders, founded in 1938 to engage youth in civic education projects, began as an education program outside of schools. It then became an official program in New York City schools during World War II, wherein staff trained teenagers to become active participants in addressing problems affecting local neighborhoods, helped develop their leadership skills by training teenagers to interact and lobby local political and business leaders, and worked with them to support racial and social equality.

The group had, for almost a decade, support from politicians like Fiorello LaGuardia and Eleanor Roosevelt as well as from the press and local communities. As the war ended, the organization was dismantled because of pressure put on the Board of Education by Catholic conservative groups who had a very different view of civic education. Unlike Youthbuilders, these conservative groups saw racial and ethnic equality as anti-American and targeted groups like Youthbuilders. For them, the aim of civic education was to instill feelings of patriotism among youth who could uphold American values in the face of a Communist threat.

Given the current fragility of democracy and the fraught project for racial equity in the United States, it seems important to examine programs like Youthbuilders for their effort at providing a space for youth to engage as agents of change in a shifting cultural and social environment. Looking back at the projects that taught youth the importance of democracy and principles of racial equity offers lessons to understand what they did as well as the insidious efforts to destroy them. This article traces the arc of the program between its start in 1938 and its demise in 1948 to draw out the lessons for our times.

Background: Educational Experimentation Before and During World War II

The period before and into World War II was a period filled with educational experimentation and the emergence of citizenship education and intercultural education. Inspired by Dewey's work, a movement for progressive education arose. Progressive schools, like the Lincoln School at Teachers College, were founded, which incorporated Dewey's ideas of project-based learning. Harold Rugg (1936), founder of what we now know as social studies education, argued that schools should teach young people how to understand contemporary times and to wrestle with the issues of the day so that they could be informed citizens, ready to engage in debate in society. Educators began to consider what progressive education might have to do with larger social change. George Counts delivered his famous "Dare a Progressive Education Be Progressive?" address that year in which he urged the Progressive Education Association to become part of a larger social movement (Counts, 1932). Dewey continued his work throughout this period, and one of his most well-known books, *Experience and Education*, appeared in 1938. The work of these progressives was seen by conservative groups as un-American. Rugg, for example, was attacked for "loving the way things were done in Russia" (Crawford, 2011).

Despite the criticism, progressive educators persisted. In 1942, the well-known Eight Year Study, commissioned by the Progressive

Education Association, showed positive academic results from progressive education (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Concurrently, educators concerned about race riots and other incidences of racial and ethnic tension in the 1930s and 1940s developed a method of "intercultural education" to "highlight the traditions of specific ethnic groups and their positive contributions to the American historical narrative" (Johnson, 2002, p. 569). Intercultural education was influenced by sociological theory and grew into "a curriculum promoted by New York City teacher union activists and community advocates which had a more critical look at the psychological roots of prejudice, the social construction of race and prejudice" (Johnson, 2002, p. 580). Proponents' aim was to use education as a means to fight discrimination and to engage young people in fighting it in their communities. Johnson (2002) wrote that New York City's "unique mix of radical teachers, grassroots community organizations, and progressive scholars advanced the intercultural education agenda beyond the cultural contributions and human relations approach to address issues of racism and inequality" (p. 568).

Before too long, programs inside and outside of schools cropped up to help students wrestle with racism and inequality. For example, Gertrude Ayer, the first African American woman to be appointed principal of a New York City school, implemented a "child-centered curriculum in her Harlem elementary school, where students engaged in critical problem-solving activities, developed their own school-run businesses, and formed a city government as part of their citizenship curriculum" (Johnson, 2002, p. 570). Outside the schools, the Harlem Committee, made up of teachers and community activists, including Ayer, advocated for better conditions, which resulted in new school buildings for Harlem for Black children, in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

These experiments in education were profoundly influential for Youthbuilders. Without the context of this work, it would be hard to imagine Youthbuilders conceptualizing their work in the way that they did. They were particularly impacted by both the progressive experiential education projects as well as the intercultural education movement and combined these approaches to create a special brand of civic education that went beyond contributing to the war effort, recreational and vocational programs, or even civic awareness. Youthbuilders' civic education program taught young people to make social change and work toward racial and ethnic equality.

Anxiety Over Youth During World War II

Another important context for Youthbuilders was the growing anxiety over youth during the war period. With parents working for the war effort, there was an uneasiness about what was happening with young people. In November 1942, the *New York Times* published a fictional story of what they considered a typical teenage boy, Johnny:

Johnny used to belong to a neighborhood boys club, but it shut down due to lack of funds, after its leaders were called into service. He was also interested in a flying club, but the leader of that club is in the Air Corps now. The older boys that might have carried it on are in

pre-flight training for which Johnny is too young. He has become a problem child in school and a persistent truant, with no one at home to check up on him. He has been running around with a neighborhood gang that has begun to siphon gas from parked cars. He's heading for serious trouble and doesn't see that anybody cares. (Bates, 1942, p. SM10)

This story was a metaphor for the anxieties people felt because of World War II. During the war, American lives changed dramatically. Fathers, brothers, and uncles were drafted, and “about 20% of American families lived without the income of one of their family members and without two adults to take care of children” (Tuttle, 1993, p. 31). Women went to work to make up for some of the money that was lost when husbands went to fight; “almost three million women went to work in the war industries at the height of the war” (Tuttle, 1993, p. 72). Teenagers also took on adult responsibilities. As 18- and 19-year-olds were drafted into the army, younger teens took their place in the workforce. Many states suspended child labor laws during the war, and “by 1944, an estimated 3 million young people between the ages of fourteen and seventeen were working” (Lingeman, 1970, p. 161). The draw of a paying job caused many young people to leave school, enabling them to contribute to the family income and providing them with new independence.

Social workers became concerned that “extremely high wartime wages were being paid to young people, giving them an exaggerated sense of their importance” (“Delinquency Rise Laid,” 1942). With this newfound independence, young people did not see school as especially important. Employment opportunities caused national high school enrollments to decline by 1,200,000 between 1941 and 1944 (Lingeman, 1970, p. 161). The enrollment was so bad at one point that the US Office of Education and the Children’s Bureau began a “Go to School Drive” (Tuttle, 1993, p. 241). The concern over school attendance soon bled into anxieties over crime. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, claimed that juvenile delinquency was increasing because of “boom conditions and easy money in the hands of youth” (“FBI Director Believes,” 1943). Even Eleanor Roosevelt attributed juvenile crime in part to “unusually high wages for young workers” (“Delinquency Rise Pictured,” 1943). They pointed to examples of violence among youth throughout the country, and given that most of the participants in these conflicts were youth, this ignited anxiety over out-of-control teenagers.

Concurrently, there were a series of race riots involving young people in cities around the country. This climaxed in 1943, when there were race riots throughout the nation “everywhere the color line was crossed” (Schneider, 2001, p. 60). One of the most well-known was the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 in which youth of color dressed in zoot suits, a form of “visual protest” symbolizing exclusion from the mainstream, were attacked by white military service members (Daniels, 1997, p. 208). In Harlem, a rumor of a white policeman’s shooting of a Black service member sparked violence among young people. There were outbreaks of anti-Semitism by Irish Catholics as well, fueled by the xenophobic and popular radio personality Father Coughlin, who blamed Jews for American entry into the war (Bayor, 1988).

As in many times of uncertainty in American history, the tumult from a combination of shifts in family roles and racial and ethnic tension was expressed in fears over the role of young people. This fear manifested in worries about juvenile crime. Mass media reflected this panic. *Youth in Crisis*, a Hollywood film whose content is evident by its title, was released in 1943 and played in hundreds of theaters. *Youth Runs Wild*, *The Reality of Terror*, and *Where Are Your Children?* were all released to theaters in 1944 and seemed to reflect the notion that juvenile crime was out of control. Compounding these fears were newspapers’ daily headlines during the war: “Child Delinquency Is Deemed Serious” (1942), “Sharp Rise in Juvenile Delinquency Seen by Big Brothers as a Result of the War” (1942) “Delinquency Rise Feared Due to War” (1942), and “Erring Youth on the Increase” (1942). Hoover suggested that youth groups and civic organizations could play a role in transforming delinquent youth into productive citizens:

Delinquent youth, by turning to crime, are becoming traitors to their country. It remains for adult America to see to it that our young people are given a chance to prove their patriotism. Let us provide them with recreational and vocational programs where they can really have something all of their own. Let us give them things to do that are actually connected with the war effort so that their patriotism can be an active practical thing and not merely a colorful term. Above all, let us by our own lives give them some worthwhile examples after which to pattern their ideals and actions. (“FBI Director Believes,” 1943)

Yet political leaders had no idea how to do this. Some funding increased for programs, but the larger question of how to engage young people in a democratic society was taken up by those more suited to the task, educators.

Youthbuilders’ Beginnings

Youthbuilders, a civic education program that operated in New York City public schools, responded to the anxiety-driven interest in engaging youth in something positive that supported the country. Started in 1938 by private citizens, it became an official program of the Board of Education in 1943. Its main founder, Sabra Holbrook, was a social worker in Boston before coming to New York, where she collaborated with Byrnes MacDonald, onetime head of New York City’s Crime Prevention Bureau, to start Youthbuilders. By the early 1940s, prominent city officials like Newbold Morris, a city council member, Dr. Elias Lieberman, associate superintendent of schools, and Dr. Benjamin Greenberg, assistant superintendent of schools, were on Youthbuilders’ board. The goal of Youthbuilders was to inspire young people to make changes in their lives, their schools, and their neighborhoods. Youthbuilders wanted to engage youth in civic life and give them opportunities to learn through meaningful work solving problems that affected them and to instill in them faith that the government would respond to them. As founder Sabra Holbrook stated in the November 1943 issue of *High Points*, a magazine for New York City teachers, the Youthbuilders students in New York City’s public schools did not speak of government as “they.” To them, government was “we” (Holbrook, 1943b, p. 44).

Holbrook (1943a) made Youthbuilders' goals explicit in her book, *Children Object*, which provided a detailed description of the program. In it, Holbrook criticized the government, curriculum designers, and the media for being out of touch with young people. Youth were disinterested in school activities, programs, and classes because they were poorly communicated to them, she contended. Young people understood that they learned well by doing, not by reading about doing. By using pedagogical techniques inspired by a methodology known as the Activity Program, Youthbuilders started clubs in schools across the city and the country.

Teachers ran the clubs, many of whom were trained by Holbrook herself. Teachers were not to dictate the content of conversations in the clubs. In Youthbuilders clubs, teachers asked students what they wanted to deal with, what issues were of concern to them, and what problems they were facing. Holbrook's in-service programs trained teachers to engage young people and to remain in the background while children participated ("Teachers Training," 1942). Here Youthbuilders seemed to be influenced by Dewey's notion of school as "embyronic community," in which the school reflects the larger society and as such makes each child a member, imbues them with the spirit of service, and provides them with the tools for decision-making and self-direction (Dewey, 1907). Additionally, another influence seems to be William Kilpatrick's (1918) project method, in which students engage in activities to learn.

Youthbuilders' teachers did not let the students completely dictate the direction of the group's work, however, and guided the students toward projects. Holbrook created a program for citizenship education to guide students and to steer them away from delinquent behavior. Holbrook stated:

Children who are denied constructive participation in community life, find their excitement in destructive pursuits. Their energy and imagination turns to attacking society, instead of attacking the evils that undermine society. It is Youthbuilders' job to help children find positive opportunities to serve their communities- to practice the responsibilities of citizenship now. (Holbrook, 1943a, p. 37)

Practicing the responsibilities of citizenship involved many elements, from learning to work together through service and volunteerism, to embracing ethnic and racial differences, understanding the virtues of democracy, and supporting the war effort by preventing the spread of Communism and fascism. Holbrook wrote:

We at Youthbuilders don't care what party or political faith a child follows. We do care that they keep faith with American constitutional democracy, which allows free choice between parties. Moreover, we want young people to know why they believe as they do; we want them to arrive at their own conclusions through a process of scientific investigation, interchange of opinion and group thinking. . . We even want them to measure democracy against other forms of government. We just give the children a chance to test its practicality for themselves. We don't tell them they should be good citizens. We let them find out that good citizenship pays. (Holbrook, 1943a, p. 42)

In practice, Youthbuilders used a variety of strategies to get to this goal of understanding democracy. One was getting young people to speak to political figures. At one of these events, attended by Eleanor Roosevelt, a Youthbuilders participant explained how the program taught them to deal with problems. The student exclaimed, "When you disagree with a person instead of socking him in the eye, go home and look for some correct answers and then decide who should get a sock in the eye" (Mackenzie, 1940). The hope was to steer young people away from fighting each other and to work across difference.

Youthbuilders' School-Based Projects

Students in Youthbuilders groups would often begin with a topic and go on a fact-finding mission to learn as much as they could about it. In two cases, at P.S. 50 in the Bronx and at J.H.S. 43 in Manhattan, students wanted to find out what children could do to help shorten the war. Youthbuilders arranged for them to interview authorities at the Chinese, Russian, and British Consular Information Services on how children were playing a role in the war effort in those countries. Then they went to the heads of various war agencies in New York City to find out how young Americans could best serve to end the war. The Bronx school started a tin can salvage, while the Manhattan school tried to bring Black and white members of their community together. The students at J.H.S. 43 did lab tests to show that blood of all races is identical in composition. They shared their findings in discussions and in posters in the neighborhood. At P.S.1 in Queens, students wanted to learn about China. They studied the geography and culture of China and ended up holding a school fair to raise funds for United China Relief (Holbrook, 1943a).

Given the ethnic and racial tensions and violence at the time, a major focus of many of the Youthbuilders groups was addressing that tension and building cross-cultural understanding. For example, one group of junior high school students made up of Polish, Hungarian, and Czech students noticed that their club had internal fighting between the different groups. "They had no national unity," as Holbrook (1943a) described it. The students wanted to examine where prejudices came from and concluded that their parents' views were to blame. The young people thought that a sense of superiority was cultivated through the ethnic social clubs to which their parents and families belonged, which was in turn passed on to them. To combat those views, the students performed a skit for the Parents Association, "Are All Men Brothers?," hoping to confront the adults on their prejudices and to talk about equality. Though adults were reluctant at first, Holbrook claimed, barriers started to break down after a few months, and students and adults from the different nationalities started to build relationships (Bloch, 1944; Holbrook, 1943a, p. 27-29).

In another example, a youth group in Washington Heights reached out to local civil rights leaders to understand racial tension in their community. At the time, the Manhattan neighborhood was changing from an all-white one to a mixed neighborhood with white, Black, and Puerto Rican residents, and the youth wanted to understand the racial conflict brewing. White residents complained about the neighborhood "turning over." Black and white

gangs began to make their presence known after a landlord provoked anxieties when he rented apartments in the same building to both whites and Blacks. Concurrently, the local Youthbuilders group was trying to understand structural issues, like unemployment among Black residents. The group conducted interviews with Frank Crosswaith, a civil rights and labor leader, and Dr. Frank Kingdon, author and educator, whom they later invited to speak at their school about some of the reasons why the problem existed and to find out what to do about it.

Shortly after, the young people organized a mediation between the local gangs. They convinced Morris, from the city council, to sign a letter inviting gang leaders and members to a “mediation meeting”; there, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, social worker and activist, told the gang members that they were making “swell allies for Hitler because Hitler hopes to divide Americans into factions that will fight each other” (Holbrook, 1943a, p. 73). The meeting got everyone talking about ways to repair the relationships between groups. Youthbuilders youth talked about wanting opportunities to interact, like in a gym where everyone could play on interracial teams and clubs and with the restoration of a student government that was taken away before “the trouble” started, both of which were enacted.

While the results of these examples seem a little too easily grasped in Holbrook’s descriptions, the work of Youthbuilders suggests an attempt to discuss and address racial and ethnic tension among youth and community members. The young people came up with concrete suggestions and tried to address what Holbrook called “stupid division” and achieve the “strength and joy in unity” (Holbrook, 1943a, p. 75). Youthbuilders was a group willing to take on very real issues around race in the lived experience of young people. This was an important exercise in fully preparing young people to live in the world, wrestle with problems of the day, and be civic participants in a democracy.

Youthbuilders was not a radical organization. In fact, their teachers felt as if they had to steer young people away from Socialist or Communist positions at different junctures. The civic education program gained popularity and even expanded to Chicago and Philadelphia, but it was not to last. A quite different vision of civic education would emerge, put forth by conservative Catholic organizations. They used the Catholic newspaper *The Brooklyn Tablet*, to launch a campaign against Youthbuilders and other groups they considered Communist. Their vision for civic education was ostensibly grounded in patriotism and anti-Communism but was a thinly veiled project to take down groups that taught young people to value racial and ethnic differences, harkening back to an older version of citizenship.

The Campaign Against Youthbuilders

The campaign to take down Youthbuilders can be traced to the red-baiting that followed World War I, and which manifested in bodies like the Rapp-Coudert Committee, a New York State-appointed committee to investigate teachers and college professors in public universities who were thought to be associated with Communism. Then, one incident in October 1941 lit the spark that led to a very specific campaign against Youthbuilders. The *New*

York Times printed a story that described a Youthbuilders’ voter registration drive. This raised the suspicions of Councilman Joseph E. Kinsley, a Bronx Democrat, who was skeptical that the youth were nonpartisan.

Shortly after the article appeared, Kinsley accused Morris, a fellow councilman, and a Youthbuilders leader, of unduly influencing young children to distribute campaign literature for the LaGuardia-McGoldrick-Morris (also known as the Fusion Ticket) reelection bid, but Morris explained that the young people were only registering people to vote. However, the *New York Times* story mentioned a letter asking Youthbuilders youth to specifically work for the Junior Division of the LaGuardia-McGoldrick-Morris campaign because they had proven themselves reliable as Youthbuilders members. Holbrook and Morris insisted that the children volunteered to work on the campaign, but it soon came out that the youth were also promised free ice cream, photos with city officials, and free car fare whether they came on their own or not (“Kinsley Charges,” 1941).

Kinsley did not let up after this incident. He called on the Board of Education to do something about what he believed was a program that was asking children as young as nine years old to write essays on who they would like to see win for mayor, to ask their parents to vote a certain way, and to help distribute literature for the Fusion Ticket. Kinsley thought it was unconscionable, accused the adults of duping the youth, and said that political campaign activity had no place in school (“Kinsley Demands,” 1941). Kinsley’s attack on Youthbuilders foreshadowed a much more vicious attack that followed in 1947.

That public attack was made through a series of articles in *The Brooklyn Tablet*, a Catholic weekly paper that represented a conservative perspective similar to that of Father Coughlin, whose Christian Front organization expressed openly anti-Semitic and xenophobic views under the guise of anti-Communism. *The Brooklyn Tablet’s* articles attributed juvenile delinquency to the lack of religion in the public schools and to Hollywood’s “loose morals.” The paper called for a return to religious education and censorship of films, books, and radio programs. The reason for their fears about schools and movies, *The Tablet* said, was the growing threat of communism.

Communism was not just an ideology for *The Tablet* but a very real challenge to American life fueled by activists and organizations, particularly those working for racial equality. In October 1947, the paper investigated intercultural education. In a seemingly innocuous article entitled “City Sponsors Courses for Teachers,” the reporter suggested that intercultural education, because it dealt with racial minorities facing injustice, may “stir up hate in minorities,” which may “divide” people (“City Sponsors,” 1947). Around the same time, the Catholic War Veterans demanded that the Board of Education answer for giving permission to “subversive groups” to use the school facilities for their meetings. Other New York Catholic groups also demanded removal of Communists from government payrolls and successfully prevented a local bank from publishing a series of articles about Russia in its monthly publication for school children (Crosby, 1978).

On November 1, 1947, *The Tablet* ran an editorial entitled “Youthbuilders Inc.” that explained in no uncertain terms that *The Tablet* fully supported the civic education mission of Youthbuilders but that its staff members were “purveyors of communistic propaganda.” It went on to list the alleged Communist connections that people working with Youthbuilders had. Holbrook and Kingdon, in particular, were accused of having connections to the American Youth for Democracy, a pro-Communist organization. Judge Hubert Delaney, a Youthbuilders director, was also accused of having Communist sympathies. The article listed a series of speakers and interviewees working with Youthbuilders who either had alleged Communist connections or were alleged Communists themselves. One was the actor Canada Lee, who had addressed a group of hundreds of Youthbuilders students. *The Tablet* claimed that Lee’s name was featured in *The Daily Worker* as a draw for Communist-sponsored events. Another was Reverend Richard Morford, executive director of the National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, about which *The Tablet* wrote, “This pro-Communist organization has a subtle plan for penetrating our schools” (“Youthbuilders, Inc.,” 1947). *The Tablet* called on the Board of Education to investigate Youthbuilders’ Communist connections. This effort clearly mirrored the 1940–1942 Rapp-Coudert Committee, which was set up to investigate educators with Communist leanings in public schooling in New York State.

Morris defended Youthbuilders a few weeks later in a piece that ran in *The Tablet*. He first wrote of accused-Communist Holbrook, “Mrs. Holbrook has no contact with Communist groups and was known to be among the first to recognize American Youth Congress as such.” Morris went on to explain what he thought was really behind *The Tablet* attack: racism. Morris said that the paper’s attack on Youthbuilders was “a slight to the Negro race,” referring to the involvement of Crosswaith, Hedgeman, and other Black community members, and that they were not concerned with his politics as much as they did not like Black leadership (“Youthbuilders Are Defended,” 1947). *The Tablet* retorted that their attack was not based on race and reiterated that Youthbuilders leaders did have Communist ties. For example, *The Tablet* mentioned that Kingdon was always mentioned in *The Daily Worker*, the Communist newspaper.

Race played an interesting and subtle role in the attack on Youthbuilders. *The Tablet*, in its initial attack, did not directly address Youthbuilders’ work for racial equality, nor did it address the role of interracial leadership in the program. However, in an article that appeared in May 1948, “Youthbuilders Forum Reveals Its Weakness,” *The Tablet* became more explicit, claiming that at Youthbuilders’ spring conference, the organization pushed an intercultural agenda that the newspaper portrayed as divisive, teaching children to see only the negative aspects of America. The panel addressing the Youthbuilders group included Dr. Francis Turner, assistant director of school and community relations for the Board of Education; Dorothy Norman, columnist for the *New York Post*; and Leon Birkhead, director of the Friends of Democracy; as well as Youthbuilders students. *The Tablet* reported that the students drew pessimistic conclusions about America like “the United States is not a democracy in the true sense of the word, we

do not have either religious or political freedom, and our country is controlled by a group of race-haters” (“Youthbuilders Forum,” 1948). Equally disturbing to the paper were students who claimed their pride in American freedom and expressed satisfaction that only in America could a man like Henry Wallace, vice president under Franklin D. Roosevelt, run for president as a Progressive Party candidate. *The Tablet* concluded that these students’ remarks must have been rehearsed and the result of left-wing influence.

Later in the article, *The Tablet* summed up its opinion of intercultural education:

Intercultural groups which have sprung up like mushrooms in the past decade or so perpetuate a pattern which is to stress national, racial, and religious differences; It is to focus public attention on selected minorities. The promoters of the pattern, by perpetuating differences, obstruct the development of a nation united in its Americanism, bound by the ties of love of freedom and conscious of its common loyalty. The motives which inspire the proponents of division and purveyors of propaganda for disunity are undoubtedly monetary, and a desire to stir up dissension. (“Youthbuilders Forum,” 1948)

Youthbuilders was one among many groups involved in intercultural education and racial equality that were under attack, especially by the Catholics. In the period following World War II, the Board of Education fired eight teachers who refused to cooperate with an investigation into Communist ties, and who were some of the strongest advocates of intercultural education. Other groups, like the East and West Association, the Council on African Affairs, the Citywide Citizens Committee on Harlem, and *Common Ground* magazine, also disbanded because of shortage of funds or attacks on their patriotism (Shaffer, 1996, pp. 330–331).

Another layer of the attack on Youthbuilders was one in which the paper accused the program of an anti-Catholic bias. *The Tablet* charged Delaney with blaming parents for prejudices expressed by their children. As an example, the paper cited a case of two Catholic boys who entered a Protestant church, knocked over a Bible, and broke a window. The paper did not consider this a bias crime and reported the story as one of Catholic kids who were in a snowball fight and kept it going as they accidentally entered the Protestant church. The boys came before the judge in Children’s Court, and Delaney ruled that it was a bias crime. He had the boys and their families investigated and ordered the boys spend five days in a detention center. *The Tablet* argued that these “boys came from good homes with respectable families” and that they were treated unfairly. The paper used this incident to claim that Delaney and Youthbuilders were anti-Catholic (“Youthbuilder Officer,” 1948).

The attacks continued from the *Tablet* throughout 1948. In the meantime, the Board of Education’s Committee on Instructional Affairs launched an investigation into Youthbuilders, denying any pressure from outside groups (“*Tablet Pressure*,” 1948). As a result of the investigation, the Board of Education recommended changes to the Youthbuilders program. They wanted Youthbuilders to stop sending material to the schools unless it was approved by the Board of Superintendents, to only correspond with principals when approved by a superintendent, and to cease exploration of

any issues related to Communism. After protest by a coalition supporting Youthbuilders—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Protestant Council, and the New York Board of Rabbis—the restrictions were tempered. Undeterred, the Board of Education cut Youthbuilders’ budget. The NAACP stepped in again and restored the funds that Youthbuilders lost (Memo from NAACP, 1948).

The next stage of the Board of Education’s effort to dismantle Youthbuilders came after they conducted a survey of its program and recommended that Youthbuilders be “disbanded as rapidly as feasible” (“Youthbuilders Go,” 1948). The survey specifically called for an end to its interview activity (where students interviewed politicians, leaders of organizations, and journalists to get information for their campaigns), that teachers not be released from teaching assignments to run Youthbuilders clubs, and that the Board of Education choose a new director for Youthbuilders. The Board of Education worried that Youthbuilders had been too autonomous. They made public statements about this after Youthbuilders got funding from the NAACP. Additionally, they thought Youthbuilders was too arrogant, able to access any public official, get on any radio program, and run any event that it pleased. This produced a concern that the directors felt no loyalty or responsibility toward the Board of Education. James Marshall, chairman of the Committee on Instructional Affairs, made it clear when he said,

There should be no uncertainty as to where the allegiance of these people employed in Youthbuilders work should be. It should be to the Board and not to any outside group. We felt that this experimental work should be entirely taken over by the Board of Education (Transcript of Meeting with Board of Education, 1948).

On December 9, 1948, Youthbuilders and its coalition, this time joined by the United Parents Association, made one last effort to meet with the Board of Education, but to no avail. The group’s strongest argument, that it had widespread support, only made matters worse. Superintendent of Schools William Jensen viewed this as a conspiracy against the Board of Education and accused the coalition of such. Andrew Clauson, president of the Board of Education, echoed this sentiment by dismissing the fact that Youthbuilders had mayoral support, reminding them that the mayor did not fund them. The Board of Education ended the meeting by denying any requests for further discussion. A few weeks later, Holbrook saw no hope for winning and tendered her resignation as director of Youthbuilders.

Discussion

The story of Youthbuilders is instructive. Holbrook’s civic education program actively engaged young people, but Youthbuilders supporters’ connection to Black organizations like the NAACP was seen as threatening as the rise of the anti-Communist movement began (Schrecker, 1999). Youthbuilders was caught at the epicenter of this shifting climate, from one that tolerated progressive education, democratic participation, and intercultural education, to one that was dominated by anti-Communism, obedience to authority, and white supremacy.

Youthbuilders had explicit support from activists for racial justice, which was exactly what brought the program to an end. The fight for racial equality was conflated with Communism during the postwar period. Ironically, Youthbuilders saw Communism as a threat to democracy too, and they thought, perhaps naively, that if everyone had a stake in society and were engaged in civic life, people would have no reason to turn to subversive groups. This view became increasingly unpopular, however, and loyalties were questioned as a result of the group’s even weak connection to any left-leaning group (Shrecker, 1999). Their story shows how contentious democracy and civic education can become during a time filled with anxieties.

The shifting political winds mimics our time with states that have passed legislation to eliminate the possibility of topics like systemic racism being taught in schools. According to *Education Week*, 17 states disallow teaching narratives of American history that name racism as a characteristic feature (Schwartz, 2021). These critical race theory (CRT) bans attempt to shift the content of American history and civics courses in public schools away from a critical examination of the harshness of American slavery, for example, in favor of a more benign version in which enslaved peoples learned useful skills (Sullivan & Rozsa, 2023). For example, one Atlanta high school principal is concerned that “teachers will have to downplay the horrific events that took place in order to not be seen as promoting the idea that one race is responsible for acts of oppression committed to another race” (Hyken, 2022).

Compounding this assault on teaching about American racism, there are over 250 bills across 43 states to limit voting that will impact Black and Brown voters disproportionately. Rep. Nikema Williams, the chairperson of Georgia’s Democratic Party, said, “Republicans voted as a caucus to enact the most blatantly racist attacks on voting rights in the South since Jim Crow, after losing an election they planned, built and oversaw” (Gardner et al., 2021).

Taken together, these efforts comprise a movement to limit the power of history education and civics, and mirror the attempts of the conservative Catholics groups of the post-World War II period to limit Youthbuilders efforts. Today, as in the wartime period, there is a clear effort to curtail conversations about inequity as well as power among people of color. World War II was a time of social anxiety, and our current time is as well. The changes in technology, social identity, and racial reckoning combined with the COVID-19 pandemic have created a very uneasy period. In these times of uncertainty, it appears as if we revert to an old tension around American identity. On the one hand, there is the idea that America should be assimilative, asserting a single white Christian identity. On the other hand, there is the idea that America is a pluralistic nation that needs to make room for participation from all groups regardless of race, ethnicity, and national origin. This contestation makes engaging in teaching principles and practices in support of democracy and racial justice threatening and dangerous at times. Still, educators persist in engaging their students in democratic practices, demonstrating the willingness to challenge the backlash they may face.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning of this article, we live in a time in which democracy is under threat, and civic education, the way Dewey imagined it, is not central to young people's education. A recent article in *Democracy & Education* noted:

Though there are many models of action civics that challenge content-focused civic initiatives and have been found to positively impact students' civic and political competences, these programs are typically used as add-ons to the curriculum and/or within the out-of-school/after-school hours. (Muetterties et al., 2022)

These scholars have suggested that only a few students will encounter engaging school-based civic education that draws on experiential teaching practice and lifts their voices out of the margins. Many more will have to seek this out in programs that exist outside of schools.

Youthbuilders' leaders were willing to discuss race and ethnic tensions to find resolution or at least to build understanding and connection. Negative response to these efforts and Youthbuilders leadership being unprepared for that backlash were precisely what brought Youthbuilders to an end. Their demise indicates the fragility of efforts for democratic education as well as the ongoing resistance to building bridges across race and ethnic lines. In our current period, engaging young people in programs like Youthbuilders seems to be more needed than ever, but it is dangerous work, especially as dominant groups feel under threat. The lesson here is to be savvy about the political context and be prepared to advocate to engage young people in democracy and racial equity.

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