Social Movements, Deliberation, and Educational Governance.  
A Response to *Pragmatist Thinking for a Populist Moment*  
*Ellis Reid (Harvard University)*

**Abstract**

In this response essay, the author provides an account of the role of social movements in a democracy as part of a larger argument about democratic school governance. Focusing on Black Lives Matter (BLM), the author contends that social movements like BLM support a vibrant and legitimate democracy because they constitute vital nodes in the ongoing, norm-governed conversation that constitutes democratic politics. To make this argument, the author defends an account of democratic deliberation that recognizes (1) the contribution of emotion to our capacity for reason and (2) the fact that deliberation extends beyond the confines of official democratic fora. Zooming in on democratic school politics, the author argues that this expanded account of democratic deliberation and attendant recognition of the role that social movements can play helps clarify how to realize democratic school governance under conditions of unjust racial inequality.

This article is in response to Knight-Abowitz, K., Sellers, K. M. (2023). Pragmatist Thinking for a Populist Moment: Democratic Contingency and Racial Re-Valuing in Education Governance. *Democracy and Education, 31*(1), Article 3. Available at: https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol31/iss1/3

In “Pragmatist Thinking for a Populist Moment,” Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) took a sober look at the persistence of racial inequality in the U.S. and its implications for education, with a particular emphasis on educational governance. Drawing on the work of Glaude (2017), the authors theorized racial injustice through the lens of what Glaude has called the “value gap.” Racial injustice persists, they argued, because white Americans are systematically more valued than Black Americans and other Americans of color. This gap in how members of different racial and ethnic groups are valued manifests in our institutions and interpersonal interactions and is sustained by a set of widespread and difficult to change racial habits of thought and action (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 8). Despite the intransigence of racial injustice in the U.S., Knight-Abowitz and Sellers contended that our current political moment, marked by both left and right populist movements, offers hope for real, sustained progress toward closing the value gap. While they acknowledged that populist movements do pose significant democratic challenges, they maintained that some populist movements contain the promise of meaningful democratic transformation and more just social relations.

The core of the authors’ argument centered on Black Lives Matter (BLM), which they theorized as a populist movement that offers the hope for precisely this sort of transformation. They wrote, “We see the populist politics unleashed and developed within the BLM movement to be potentially transformative, but only if correctly understood in terms of populism’s role in provoking

Ellis Reid is a PhD candidate in education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His primary areas of scholarship lie in democratic theory, practical ethics, and education policy. In particular, his work focuses on the normative dimensions of school governance.
institutional responses consistent with principles of equity and justice” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 8). According to the authors, the key to realizing the BLM movement's transformative potential lies in channeling the movement's energy and vision into local deliberative fora, where it can help to spur meaningful policy change and stimulate the development of new, more inclusive collective narratives. At the same time, however, fully realizing the movements potential demands we must also face up to the limits of populist movements: the us-against-them framings, the privileging of emotion over reason, the tendency to rely on “empty signifiers” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 3).

There's much to recommend in this paper, not least of which is its inspiring optimism. This sense of optimism isn’t incidental to the argument. Rather, it's intimately connected to the authors’ Deweyan pragmatism. Drawing on pragmatist scholars like Glaude (2017) and Rogers (2009), Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) insisted on the belief in the possibility of intelligent social action to improve our shared world. While much contemporary writing on local school governance emphasizes failure, especially given the tremendous challenges posed by today's deeply polarized debates concerning, among other things, the teaching of race, gender, and sexuality, the authors’ vision emphasized hope and democratic possibility. Although they were clear that there are real and significant challenges to realizing the kind of deliberative democratic politics they argued is necessary for positive social change, they challenged us to fight against the paralyzing sense of inevitable failure.

Nevertheless, I take issue with the distinction Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) drew between the political dialogue that takes place within movements like BLM and the political dialogue that takes place within official deliberative bodies like school board meetings. First, I reject the dichotomy between emotion and reason that partly underpins this claim. Rather than being considered a threat to reason, emotions are best understood as an aspect of our capacity for reasoning (Elgin, 2008). I believe that once we begin to clarify the ways that emotions support reason, we can begin to think differently about the political work of movements like BLM that, at least some of the time, rely on emotional appeals. Second, I further reject the implicit contention that deliberation is something that only takes place in settings like school board meetings and other official deliberative fora. Deliberation takes place in many more venues than that, including spaces in which social movements take place: local chapter meetings, planning sessions, cafes, and internet fora. In fact, we have reason to worry that extant institutions of local democracy contribute to ongoing racial inequality in ways that are hard to overcome except through significantly remaking them.

In what follows, I expand on each of these critiques. I start by discussing the relationship between emotion and reason. I argue that a proper account of this relationship suggests a different understanding of the role of emotional appeals in social movements like BLM. Next, I turn to a discussion of deliberation and democracy within the context of U.S. school governance. I argue that deliberation occurs across society, including in those spaces where movements like BLM take place. While I don't deny the importance of deliberation, I offer a different account of the relationship between democracy and deliberation, which I argue—against the backdrop of significant segregation by race and class—points toward a different set of strategies for moving forward. First, however, I offer a more detailed account of the authors’ argument.

The Argument

The authors’ argument is grounded in an analysis of the contemporary political landscape aimed at clarifying the threats and opportunities facing our democracy today. According to the authors, our present political moment is a populist one. Understanding contemporary politics, then, demands understanding populism. The authors contended that the core of populism is the “political expression of a 'we’ against an elite 'them,’” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 3), and “populism happens when the people come to life as a form of expressed agency or articulation” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 2). Against those who see populism as primarily a threat to democracy, the authors contended that populist politics can help direct energy and attention to pressing democratic challenges like ongoing racial injustice. Drawing on Boyte (2012), they argued that populism grows “from the sense that an elite is endangering the values, identities, and practices of a culturally constituted people, its memories, origins, and ways of life.” Movements that spring from this sense of threat, they continued, can help to break up unjust concentrations of power, can help promote important values, and can help citizens develop vital civic skills (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 3).

However, the authors argued that this only captures one aspect of populism. A full understanding demands attending to populism's discursive aspect as well. Drawing on a range of contemporary scholars, the authors identified a set of core features of populist discourse: (a) the discursive opposition of the people and the elites; (b) the reliance on “emotionally charged demands rather than . . . more reasoned, complex treatments of topics”; (c) “a sense of a lack or a demand for something”; (d) “the use of empty signifiers that are already circulating in related discourses”; and (e) “a sense of democratic failure or crisis” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 3). While the authors remained neutral about these features of populist rhetoric, they recognized that each element can either support or threaten democracy. With respect to the sense of democratic crisis, for example, the authors argued that this characteristic of populist politics, “can serve to strengthen or weaken democratic goals and processes in public institutions” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 3). As they explained in more detail in a later section, realizing the promise of populism demands facing up to the challenges presented by populist rhetoric.

Much of the rest of the argument focuses on BLM, which the authors theorized as precisely the kind of populist movement that can help to promote positive democratic change. On their account,
the promise of BLM lies in its ability to break longstanding patterns of social relation and thought that sustain and partly constitute contemporary racial injustice. Here, they drew heavily on Glaude’s (2017) work on race and democracy. Following Glaude, the authors argued that racial justice demands a “revolution of value.” This revolution is necessary to close the racial value gap and calls for three interrelated shifts: (1) disrupting current racial habits; (2) changing dominant views about Black Americans and other Americans of color; and (3) revising dominant narratives about America and Americans (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 4). Disrupting bad racial habits is a particularly important aspect of this account of progress. Habits are best understood as dispositions toward actions or patterns of thought shaped through our social interactions. Generally operating subconsciously and built up over time, habits can be resistant to change. However, through participation in and engagement with movements like BLM, individuals can begin to challenge old habits, develop new ones, and learn (and contribute to) new stories about who we are and what we value.

Schools, the authors argued, will be critical sites for this work. They wrote, “A change of this scope must certainly impact public schools as foundational and—importantly, in terms of educational governance—localized institutions of both communities and of the democratic state” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 4). In addition to being important community resources, schools are also important because they are key sites for debating issues related to what we collectively value and how we understand ourselves. Critically, BLM has already begun to support progress toward racial justice in schooling: “BLM pushed more educators, more scholars, and more parents to begin or to reinvigorate school equity initiatives that had been nonexistent, sluggish, or simply more performative (‘masking’) than substantive” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 4). There is, then, significant reason for hope that real progress towards racial justice is in the offing.

However, BLM also creates challenges that limit its ability to catalyze real, lasting change. These challenges aren’t the result of deficiencies of BLM per se but rather result from features inherent in any populist movement. The problem, according to the authors, is that the populist rhetoric of movements like BLM undermines our capacity for inclusive deliberation and collective inquiry, which are jointly necessary for sustained progress toward racial justice: “The rise of populist expression across the political spectrum in U.S. society makes the deliberative work of racial reckoning that much harder to construct” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 8). The authors zoomed in on two particularly troublesome characteristics of populist rhetoric. First, populist discourse often relies on broad, general claims. While this feature of populist politics can help minimize differences among movement members and support cohesion, it can also obscure intricacies and tensions and undercut meaningful deliberation and collective inquiry. Second, the authors contended that populist discourse often relies on emotional appeals, which can generate energy and win supporters but are not conducive to deliberation or inquiry. In fact, the authors argued that “inquiry and deliberation are fed by fundamentally different dispositions than populist expression” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 8). Whereas populist discourse “generates hot emotion” like indignation or anger, deliberation and inquiry “are fed by cooler practices such as listening, critical thinking, and engaging with those who have different viewpoints and values” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 8).

Ultimately, the authors contended that we must find a way to channel populist energy into deliberative bodies like school boards that are more conducive to these “cooler practices.” This is essential because local deliberative practices play an indispensable role in a democratic community. With respect to educational governance specifically, the authors argued that deliberation and inquiry help to productively bring lay and expert views together in service of positive change. Quoting Rogers (2009), they explained that “[l]ay and expert knowledge gains whatever vitality it has from being forged through a deliberative process that makes each responsive to the other” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 7). Although populism is necessary for challenging our bad racial habits, we must find some way to take advantage of this populist energy while still retaining our capacity for democratic deliberation and inquiry—two democratic practices essential to developing new stories about who we are as a people and what we value. Although challenging, this balancing act is necessary for populist “expression to yield its democratic potential” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 9).

**Reason and Emotion**

Much of the authors’ argument rests on a distinction between the kind of political dialogue that takes place within social movements like BLM and the kind of political dialogue that takes place within official spaces like local school board meetings. I want to challenge this distinction in two related ways. The first challenge centers on the relationship between reason and emotion described by the authors. The second challenge centers on where we should look for deliberation in a democracy. While I ultimately agree with the authors that deliberation—especially about the kind of education we ought to provide young people—plays a crucial role in securing legitimacy and supporting a well-functioning democracy, I believe that the neat distinction the authors drew between the work of social movements and the work of official deliberative bodies is misleading, making it harder to grasp how we ought to move forward.

In this section, I take on the first of these two challenges. The authors contended that deliberation is best understood as a “cool” practice. They contrast the coolness of deliberation with “hot” emotions like anger and fear. Cool, then, can be understood as being unemotional, and deliberation can be understood as a kind of collective reasoning free from the corrupting influence of emotions. Following Elgin (2008), I’ll call this understanding of the relationship between reason and emotion the “standard view” (p. 33). If we grant this standard view, populist movements like...
BLM must be nondeliberative. By definition, populist movements regularly employ emotionally charged claims to motivate individuals to action. This is at least part of what the authors meant when they call BLM populist. Without getting bogged down in debates about the nature of populism, the idea that social movements like BLM rely on emotional appeals makes sense. Social movements do aim at encouraging urgent action on a range of important issues. As anyone who has been to a march or a rally knows, appeals to our emotions do play an important role in encouraging individuals to work together to push for positive change.

However, I’m skeptical of the standard view. While there are surely times when our capacity to reason is undermined by our emotional state—when we’re so angry we “see red,” for example—emotions also support our capacity for reason. This is true even for “hot” emotions like anger, fear, and indignation. I believe Elgin (2008) was right when she argued that emotions serve a variety of important cognitive functions: providing epistemic access to certain response-dependent properties, acting as evidence for other sorts of properties, and keying us into salient features of our environment (pp. 36–46). Here, I want to zoom in on one specific cognitive function that emotions can play—directing our attention. As Elgin noted, emotions can be sources of salience, highlighting aspects of a domain or context. When our emotional responses are well calibrated, they can help us perceive important patterns or features of a domain or context that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. Fear, for instance, can help direct our attention to dangers in our immediate environment, which we might otherwise miss (pp. 44–45). While it’s certainly true that inappropriately strong emotional responses can mislead us, it seems just as plausible to me that inappropriately weak or nonexistent emotional responses can limit our ability to reason well. A failure to be afraid in a situation in which we are in danger may keep us from noticing things we really ought to notice if we want to stay safe.

Importantly, we can finetune our emotional responses so that we can improve their “cognitive yield” (Elgin, 2008, p. 47). We can, for instance, work so that we feel fear only in those situations that are actually dangerous. I suspect that the emotional appeals of populist movements like BLM aim at, among other things, this sort of finetuning. I want to start by looking at fear. As Glaude (2016) noted in Democracy in Black, fear plays a key role in holding up unjust relations among white and Black Americans. Fear, he argued, regularly makes white people uneasy around Black people, putting them on guard. This can lead simply to aversion of Black people or, in tragic cases, violence and even murder (Chapter 4). White fear underpins many of our bad racial habits. “White fear takes root . . . in the habits formed as we live lives shaped by the ideas and practices of white supremacy and in the anticipation of the possible consequences that may follow from what we are doing to other people” (p. 85). Here, plainly, emotion undermines the capacity to reason about racial issues. One of the reasons that we ought to be hopeful that BLM can support the revolution of value that Glaude and the authors called for is that it can help us to recalibrate this emotional response. The rhetoric coming from BLM can force us to grapple with the real fears that many Black Americans grapple with in simply going about their lives, causing those in the grip of white fear to reevaluate their own emotional responses. Contending with the grief and rage of those who have lost loved ones in unjustified killings or being forced to wrestle with our own feelings of sadness when we see the face of someone murdered by a vigilante or police officer can encourage this kind of emotional recalibration. These experiences force a contrast between irrational white fears and the all too apt emotions of people like the late activist Erica Garner who speak out about the murder of loved ones.

I want to briefly look at anger too. While anger is often presented as being particularly hostile to reason, I contend that anger can be a rational emotion. Anger can be an apt response to an unjust social and political context—a kind of fitting appreciation of the depth of injustice we face (Srinivasan, 2018). Anger can also help us to recognize when we’re being treated unjustly, which may well be misrecognized in the absence of anger (Jaggar, 1996, p. 181). It is true that anger, even apt anger, can be counterproductive. By counterproductive, I mean to say that experiencing anger can at times harm our ability to realize our own interests—say, by constituting a kind of psychic toll. However, I also believe that the failure to be appropriately angry can prevent us from noticing patterns and features of our environment that are normatively significant. The failure to be angry when we learn about a police shooting, for instance, may discourage us from inquiring about the circumstances of the shooting—from asking why deadly force was used to noticing patterns of racial disproportionality. Such failures can limit our ethical understanding. Here, too, I believe that movements like BLM can help recalibrate our emotional responses, supporting our capacity to reason about racial injustice.

Ultimately, I believe we ought to jettison the standard view. Once we’ve made this move and fully appreciate the cognitive functions emotions can play, the opposition between populist rhetoric and deliberation is less obvious. Certainly, I don’t believe we can claim that “fundamentally different dispositions” (Knight-Abowitz & Sellers, 2023, p. 8) feed inquiry and deliberation on the one hand and populist expression on the other. Still, I haven’t yet said much about deliberation. I turn to that in the next section.

**Democracy and Deliberation**

While I believe the authors are mistaken in opposing hot emotions with the cool practices of deliberation, it may still be the case that populist movements must be supplemented by deliberation in official fora like school board meetings. Even if we accept the revision I offer, we might still accept the basic picture sketched by the authors: Populist movements like BLM are helpful but must be understood as a supplement to deliberation that takes place elsewhere. One reason this may be the case is that while movements like BLM support our ability to reason with one another, the political work that goes on in those movements doesn’t represent the kind of political dialogue necessary for a healthy, legitimate democracy. To achieve this sort of dialogue, we need well-functioning local deliberative fora that bring citizens together.

Without denying that bodies like local school boards can support justice, I’m skeptical that the kind of thoroughlygoing local
deliberation the authors describe is necessary to promoting positive change. Moreover, I worry that devolving significant decision-making authority to the local level risks being counterproductive given significant segregation by race and class. I start with the first of these two claims. I contend that the authors implicitly rely on what Young (2000) has called, borrowing from Habermas, the “centred image of the democratic process” (p. 45). Young wrote, “The centred image of deliberative democracy implicitly thinks of the democratic process as one big meeting” (p. 46). This view of democracy takes face-to-face deliberation among citizens as the standard for democratic legitimacy and insists that we attempt to realize this ideal in our institutions as best we can. A decentered model of deliberative democracy, by way of contrast, accepts that democratic politics can’t be identified with a single institution or set of institutions. Rather, democratic deliberation ought to be understood as a kind of norm-governed conversation that takes place across time and space, spanning both state institutions and the institutions that make up civil society.

With Young (2000), I contend that the decentered model better faces up to the complexities of modern democratic societies. As Young wrote, “Society is bigger than politics and outruns political institutions, and thus democratic politics must be thought of as taking place within the contexts of large and complex social processes the whole of which cannot come into view” (p. 46). Importantly, once we’ve shifted from a centered to a decentered picture of the democratic process, we can begin to theorize the political dialogue of movements like BLM as one part of the large-scale, distributed conversation that constitutes democratic politics. I believe this claim is defensible even if we grant the authors’ contention that, as a populist movement, BLM relies on emotional appeals. As I have argued here, such appeals can be understood as supporting our capacity for reason, strengthening our ability to deliberate with one another. With respect to the authors’ second worry about the reliance on broad claims and “empty signifiers,” I accept that political slogans and other kinds of broad language certainly constitute part of the movement’s rhetoric. However, we can’t simply assume that this rhetoric exhausts the kinds of conversations going on within the movement. I believe that many affiliated with BLM and other similar movements regularly engage in meaningful deliberation about political issues. This deliberation occurs across the full range of spaces where the BLM movement takes place: marches, planning meetings, gatherings of local chapters, online fora, and myriad other spaces virtual and physical.

I don’t want to overdraw the distinction between what I’m calling the decentered model of deliberative democracy and the pragmatist vision of democracy defended by the authors, however. On their view, too, a healthy, legitimate democracy involves significant mobilization of citizens coming together to form publics in response to social, political, and economic problems. On both accounts, a robust civil society is critical to the vibrancy and legitimacy of our democracy. That said, in drawing a sharp distinction between the political work of movements like BLM and the political work done in places like school board meetings, I believe the authors remain committed to a picture of democracy that privileges the deliberation occurring in small, local deliberative fora—in effect, centering their picture of democracy on those spaces. I believe privileging these local deliberative bodies is a mistake. We do still need to maintain a connection between representative and represented. I accept that deliberation in spaces like school board meetings can help with this and further agree that there must be venues where citizens and representative can exchange reasons and ideas. However, the institutional arrangements best suited to this task can’t be shaken out of a normative theory.

Most troublingly, I believe privileging local deliberative bodies makes it harder to face up to the problems with our current institutions of democratic school governance. While the authors are clear-eyed about the ways that these institutions regularly fail to support meaningful, inclusive deliberation and collective inquiry, they remain committed to the idea that these institutions can be reformed. I’m less sanguine about this possibility. Given significant and widespread segregation by race and class, I argue that the set of institutions through which we govern our schools helps maintain bad stories about who we are as a people and how racial inequality has developed. As Hayward (2013) has persuasively argued, the long history of de jure segregation in the U.S. has contributed to the racialization of space—that is, the association of particular spaces with particular people. In overlaying the social geography of the U.S. with racialized meanings, we ensure that individuals learn about who they are and where they belong as they learn to navigate the world. In moving through cities and towns carved up by race and class, we develop ideas about where people like us can and can’t go and learn stories, bad stories, about the nature of particular places and the people who occupy them. These bad racial stories distort our understanding of racial inequality, encouraging us to misunderstand the significance of race and view racialized class inequality as natural or unavoidable. Despite the fact that such racial stories are demonstrably false, they prove particularly sticky precisely because “they are built into the very fabric of urban and suburban landscapes” and “acquire a kind of geographic facticity that renders them lived reality” (Hayward, 2013, p. 47).

In the U.S., those social borders that mark the boundary between citizens of different racial backgrounds and socioeconomic status regularly coincide with local political boundaries, including boundaries separating school districts. In layering political boundaries on top of these less formal social boundaries, we reinforce the invisibility of those social processes undergirding unjust racial inequality. We naturalize racial inequality and lend support to bad racial stories. While I endorse the authors’ contention that we must close the racial value gap and develop new, better stories about who we are, I worry that ordinary school politics represents the wrong venue for this work. If we take these worries seriously, it may well be the case that those engaged in social movements like BLM ought to endeavor to engage state and federal officials in a bid to remake how our schools are governed.

2 “The major normative problem of representation is the threat of disconnection between the one representative and the many he or she represents” (Young, 2000, p. 132).
Critically, suggesting this isn’t to give up on a commitment to deliberative democracy. Rather, it represents the acknowledgment that democratic politics are messy, that deliberation occurs across society, and that realizing our democratic commitments demands careful attention to our social and political context.

Conclusion
We rightly value deliberation, which is key to democratic legitimacy and vital to intelligent social action. Moreover, I agree with Knight-Abowitz and Sellers that democratic deliberation about our schools and the kind of education we provide to young people is a vital democratic task. Finally, I agree that movements like BLM have provided significant energy to the longstanding fight for racial justice in education and more broadly. Nevertheless, I believe a broader view of democratic deliberation—broader in terms of both recognizing the role that emotions play and acknowledging the range of spaces in which deliberation occurs—will help us to think more fully about how to realize a just multiracial democracy.

References