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**PLACE-BASED EDUCATION IN DETROIT:
A CRITICAL HISTORY OF THE JAMES & GRACE LEE BOGGS
SCHOOL**

ABSTRACT: This essay is a critical history of the Boggs School in Detroit. The mission of the Boggs School is to provide an alternative model of education that directly responds to the social, economic, and cultural politics privatizing Detroit. Based on the work of faculty, administrators, and parents collaborating within a shared governance model, the Boggs School offers an alternative pedagogy that focuses on local community issues, the ultimate goal of which is to work against the social, political, and economic inequality specific to Detroit. In the context of education activism, the significance of the Boggs School is that it centralizes activist schooling as a complement to teacher activism. More specifically, the school adds to our understanding of activist schooling traditions, the work of African American radicals in creating transformative education, and critical notions of schooling that operate both within and outside the public school tradition. In addition to describing the activist history of the Boggs School, this essay will describe the ways in which the community orientation of the school is the foundation for both its radical pedagogy and its social justice activism.

Introduction

In 2013, the James and Grace Lee Boggs School opened in the Sophie Wright Settlement House on Detroit's east side. In its first year, the school enrolled 46 students in its kindergarten through fourth grade classes—78% African American, 8% white, 2% Hispanic, and 10% multiracial. Almost 70% of the students qualified as free and reduced lunch eligible ("State of Charter Schools"). By 2014, the now K-5 school served 79 students. This demographic information not only provides a description of the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the student body, it also provides an important comparison to U.S. educational trends in charter school segregation. Nationally, charter schools inhabit hypersegregated metropolitan areas like Detroit, and as a result these charters enroll a disproportionately high percentage of black students (Frankenberg et al. 1-6). Yet, for the Boggs School founders, a reason for opening the school in this particular area was that it would serve as the neighborhood's public school when the previous elementary school was forced to close. In this context, the school's demographics mirror the social geography of its east side neighborhood, which is predominantly black and low-income. Whereas racial segregation, class stratification, and educational inequity are typically perpetuated by charter schools, the Boggs School is organized around these social justice issues to develop a community school that responds to the challenges posed by the conditions of life in a city experiencing postindustrial decline, and more

specifically the systemic inequities of the public school system. The unique character of this charter school is reflective of the history and mission of the Boggs School to provide an alternative model of education that directly responds to the social, economic, and cultural politics privatizing Detroit.

This article argues that, unlike traditional charters, the Boggs School centralizes activist schooling as a complement to teacher activism. Faculty, administrators, and parents collaborate within a kind of shared governance model, presenting an alternative pedagogy that focuses on local community issues, the ultimate goal of which is to work against the social, political, and economic inequality specific to Detroit. Furthermore, the school adds to our understanding of activist schooling traditions, the work of African American radicals in creating transformative education, and critical notions of schooling that operate both within and outside the public school tradition. To support these claims, I will offer a critical history of the Boggs School, paying particular attention to the efforts of teachers and community activists to educate, agitate, and organize in Detroit. My critical assessment of the school's history, educational projects, and grassroots organizing will focus on the following three areas: the events leading to the formation of the Boggs School; the history of radical education informing the school's theory and practice; and the school's social, political, and educational interventions in Detroit and the way in which this activism is influencing national conversations. On a local level, this essay will examine the development of the Boggs School in this context: its origins in the Detroit Summer programs and its support for academic labor and public sector workers. In response to the emergency management of Detroit Public Schools (DPS) beginning in 2002, which has effected massive school closures and the elimination of thousands of teaching and support staff jobs, among other austerity measures, the Boggs School has directly intervened in the politics of public education: the school advocates a critical pedagogy of "solutionary thinking" against both the privatization of public education and the school reform movement's emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing; the school operates as a neighborhood school organized by teacher, administrator, and parent involvement in curriculum, budget and operations, and community involvement; and the teachers are unionized under the American Federation of Teachers, Michigan Alliance of Charter Teachers and Staff (AFT Michigan ACTS).

Taken together, I will argue that the Boggs School presents an opportunity to map how communities can resist neoliberal reforms. The history of the school illuminates the lessons of several twentieth-century activist, progressive, and leftist movements as foundational for twenty-first century education. And fundamentally, the Boggs School educates students to meet Grace Lee Boggs' demand that students be engaged in the community-building process "with the same audacity with which the civil rights movement engaged them in desegregation activities" (Boggs et al. 39).

However, this essay will also provide critical assessment of the Boggs School as a work in progress, addressing common critiques of its founding as a charter school and the fact that it has accepted public funding and private grants from corporate advocates of privatization and school choice, including most notably the Kellogg Foundation. To that end, critics have charged that the Boggs School is misguided, conservative, or reactionary (Petkov, "Detroit's Grand Bargain"; Petkov, "In Defense"; Jones). Its founding as a charter school and collaboration with supporters of neoliberal education policies situates it within Detroit's education marketplace, complicating the model of activist schooling it champions, if not advancing gentrification of the public school system, the school's immediate neighborhood, and, ultimately, Detroit. Yet, the unique origins and situation of the school address these realities in important and interesting ways.

Building the Boggs School

The decision to open the Boggs School as a grassroots charter was based on two deeply related series of events—the formation of a reading group facilitated by Grace Lee Boggs to study the American education system, and the emergency management of DPS that enacted neoliberal austerity measures in an attempt to privatize the public school system. The chronology and simultaneity of these events are important. Beginning in 2002, public school teachers and community activists met at the Boggs Center to Nurture

Community Leadership to analyze the persistence of the “factory model paradigm of education”—a postwar education model that prepares students for future factory work and managerial jobs through the use of standardized operations, instructions, and schedules (G. Boggs, “Education”; Foster). In 2008, five of the teachers and community activists formed “Project 313,” a so-called visionary collective that began to organize around the idea of starting a new school. Importantly, 2008 also marked the beginning of Detroit Public School’s emergency management with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan determining that DPS was unable to manage its finances. By 2009, Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm appointed Robert Bobb, a 2005 graduate of the Broad Superintendent’s Academy, a program that specializes in the training of education reformers who advocate corporate management models for schools, as emergency manager. This history will be described in more detail below. However, this overview should emphasize two things. First, the founding of the Boggs School is not conservative or reactionary based on the claim that its organizers were looking to capitalize on the emergency management of DPS to open as a public charter. Instead, as my periodization will make clear, Project 313 was organizing around the issues of public education before, during, and after the implementation of crisis management. Second, the school’s founders were organizing using James Boggs’ “two-pronged approach” for community building against external enemies and internal contradictions: in the first step, activists must resist the efforts of corporations and city officials to redevelop or privatize Detroit against the people’s best interests; and in the second step, activists must create new institutions and build new communities that move beyond capitalist exploitation (“Community Building” 334-335). In this context, resolving the complex issues of the education system requires not only that the austerity and privatization measures of the corporate school reform movement be stopped, but also that education must be re-imagined. Indeed, this model of grassroots educational activism informed the theory and practice of the first Detroit Summer and later the Boggs School.

In 1992, James and Grace Lee Boggs started Detroit Summer, designed as a multicultural intergenerational youth program working to transform Detroit communities through youth leadership, creativity, and collective action. While Detroit Summer was initially founded as an alternative pedagogical model to the limited programs available to Detroit’s urban youth, the Boggses were very clear that their program was also a multifaceted effort to address Detroit’s social inequality and the systematic inequities of the public school system. Students involved in the program organized themselves to address a variety of community needs and neighborhood issues, including turning vacant lots into community gardens and parks, painting public murals, and rehabbing houses (Boggs et al. 4). In addition to doing this practical community work, the students were also engaging in problem-based pedagogy that incorporated lessons on economics, transportation, urban planning, civics, and community activism in a student-directed environment. According to Grace Lee Boggs, the idea for Detroit Summer was instigated by Martin Luther King, Jr.’s critique of educational strategies that attempted to “instill white middle-class values in black youth” (“Freedom Schooling”). Instead, King called for the creation of educational programs “to involve young people in direct actions ‘in our dying cities’ that would be self-transforming and structure-transforming” (“Freedom Schooling”). In 1990s Detroit, this meant organizing education around issues like the city’s postindustrial decline and high unemployment, the mass incarceration of black men, and housing foreclosures.

Detroit Summer’s model of education as community activism motivated Julia Putnam, Project 313 cofounder and current Boggs School principal, to become an educator. However, although she discovered her interest in teaching and working with Detroit teenagers through Detroit Summer, Putnam was surprised by her difficulties in the classroom. Her students seemed disengaged from their education, and she was unable to make substantive systematic changes, for example reducing dropout rates, which by 2007 were at 58 percent.¹ The other members of Project 313 had similar concerns about the effectiveness of the educational system. Nate Walker and Francis Donner came to Detroit with Teach For America (TFA), which placed college graduates in Detroit Public Schools for two years beginning in 2004. Walker was frustrated by evaluations that praised him for his students sitting still, a behavioral component supporting TFA’s “‘number-driven’ approach focused on raising test scores,” a pedagogical method that he came to realize limited his ability to deliver major change (“Will Teach for America Come Back?”). To

address these concerns, Project 313, which also included law school student Amanda Rosman and sociology graduate student Al DeFreece, began to develop a new educational paradigm and to discuss how that theory of education could be implemented in a school setting. Beginning with the question “what should kids know?” the group decided that the ideal student would be both academically competent and knowledgeable at practical skills. They would be able to think critically about and mediate conflict, engage in politics, take an interest in community sustainability, and be satisfied (if not happy) with their life choices.² By adopting the Detroit Summer model for their school design, Project 313 chose to work within a service-learning model that encourages students to mediate conflict and solve real problems. Emphasizing engaged learning, students see themselves as a part of the community, responsible for building, developing, and maintaining the local economy.

Whereas the radical activist history of the Boggses influenced the teaching philosophy of the school, the events surrounding the emergency management of DPS shaped the Boggs School’s practical development. In 2009, Robert Bobb was appointed the Emergency Manager of the 87,000-student Detroit Public Schools (DPS). He was tasked with addressing the district’s deficit, which was projected to peak at \$305.8 million by June 2009, and creating a Master Education Plan for 21st Century Teaching and Learning and a Master Long-Term Financial Plan (“Robert C. Bobb Biography”). Importantly, his appointment overlapped with an already-existing push from several private foundations to reshape the Detroit public school system as a kind of education marketplace. For example, the Skillman Foundation has historically shaped education policy to support the school reform movement, specifically charterization and school choice, through its sizable donations. In 2006, the group committed a total of \$600 million over ten years to transform the schools in six Detroit neighborhoods (Gross). Bobb’s plan centered on school closures, job cuts, and the elimination and outsourcing of school services. During his term as emergency manager, between 2009 and 2011, Detroit closed 59 schools and cut 30 percent of its workforce. Because DPS still had a deficit of more than \$300 million despite these austerity measures, Bobb announced that one-third of Detroit Public Schools would be closed or turned over to private charter schools. In April 2011, Bobb issued layoff notices to the district’s 5,466 salaried employees, including all of its teachers (Dolan; Hulett). Indeed, Bobb’s successors Roy Roberts, Jack Martin, and Darnell Earley have maintained similar neoliberal management strategies, Earley announcing ten days into his term in January 2015 that more layoffs may be necessary (Lewis).

Whereas DPS emergency managers pursued a top-down management strategy to reform the education system, the Project 313 collective maintained their bottom-up, community-oriented approach. In 2009, after a year of preliminary research within their discussion group, Project 313 partnered with the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership as their fiduciary sponsor. By December 2009, they launched the concept of the Boggs School, developed a curriculum around place-based education (PBE), and began to work on progressive governance structures. In 2010, the group began dialoging with Detroit residents and community organizations about educational goals, organizational models, and specific community needs as the group began to look for a target neighborhood in which to start the school. Also in 2010, the Boggs School was awarded a charter school planning grant from the Michigan Department of Education, as well as a planning grant from the Skillman Foundation. In 2012, the Boggs School was awarded a Kellogg Foundation grant for urban agriculture and their proposed local food program, and they were awarded a charter by Eastern Michigan University. After signing a lease on the Sophie Wright Settlement House, the school opened in August 2013.

The organization and financing of the school has been a self-conscious issue, first for the Project 313 group and then for the Boggs School administration. On the one hand, opening as a charter school could be seen as a kind of support, if not facilitation, of the neoliberal education reforms restructuring DPS. On the other hand, because of the economic and administrative policies announced as priorities by Bobb—namely, budget cuts, school closures, and charterization—there were otherwise few alternatives available to the Boggs School. William Ayers, a radical education theorist affiliated with the Boggs Center, has provided context both for the ethical considerations the Boggs School faced when deciding to pursue a charter organization and the progressive rationale they negotiated based on that choice. In the Boggs Center pamphlet titled *Another Education is Possible*, Ayers argues: “There is no single, instant, perfect,

or orthodox solution: schools within schools; a general walk-out and strike; charter schools; community schools; takeover of current districts—each can be a site of invention and struggle. The answers will be found in what kind of educational projects we are able to generate, what kind of resistance we undertake” (Boggs et al. 73). And indeed this is the strategy the Boggs School teachers, administrators, and community organizers pursued.

The Boggs School administration and board of directors insisted on transparency regarding their charter authorization and funding. The school’s website documents the Boggs School charter organization and structure, its budget and salary schedule, its board of directors meeting agendas and minutes, and its progress timeline that details the school’s history, importantly including all of its granting institutions. The website also includes a school blog through which the school’s administrators and teachers provide commentary on administrative and curricular issues. This blog has published several posts in which the school’s cofounders discuss issues of charterization, including one by Boggs School co-founder and Executive Director Amanda Rosman on the topic of their charter authorization from Eastern Michigan University (EMU). In “Can Authorizers and Schools Share Powerful Relationships?” Rosman describes a meeting she had with the EMU charter office in which the group discussed roles, responsibilities, and long-term plans. In addition to summarizing the meeting, she also reiterates the Boggs School’s goals for their charterization: first, because the school and authorizer have a primary responsibility to the students and the community, all collective work should transparently work toward community benefit; second, the purpose of the charter is to free parents, teachers, and community leaders from bureaucracy; third, the goals of this charterization are to maintain a progressive model of education without coercion from the charter management organization to support a reform model; *and* finally, the long-term plan of the school is to transition away from the charter model to self-management.³ Other blog posts detail the various grant allocations the Boggs School have received from state and federal education agencies and nonprofit foundations. This list includes a two-year, \$50,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation, one of the leading financial supporters of school privatization and for-profit charters, and a start-up grant from the Skillman Foundation, one of several foundations in Detroit planning to fund upwards of 70 charter schools in the city by 2015 (Goodman). While the grant is seemingly contradictory to the stated mission and core ideology of the Boggs School, the school insists that the grants will support a nonprofit charter that emphasizes social justice (“Boggs Educational Center”).

In the first two years of operation for the Boggs School, this is a particularly important line to maintain given recent reporting on the poor transparency, accountability, and performance of charter schools in Detroit, and more specifically EMU’s poor record of re-authorizing charter schools that fail to meet long-term performance standards (Jesse). On the one hand, the charterization through EMU and the initial seed money from the Kellogg and Skillman foundations provide a practical and efficient method for the Boggs School to work with low-income children. Not only is the social geography of the school predominantly lower income, thus closing off the option of opening as a tuition-based independent school; but also the possibility of organizing around the model of a grassroots charter is increasingly limited as Detroit’s education marketplace increasingly supports the charterization of schools managed by for-profit corporate education companies. On the other hand, to become the neighborhood school that re-imagines the educational system, the Boggs School must become autonomous from the oversight of the various groups supporting neoliberal education policies. In the mean time, the school emphasizes a model of education consistent with the successful paradigm of Detroit Summer, which is largely organized around student engagement with social justice issues in the city, and it collaborates with the NAACP, AFT-Michigan, the United Way, and activist parent groups in citywide initiatives like the Coalition for the Future of Detroit’s Schoolchildren to ensure that progressive voices are present in shaping local school-choice education policy.

This leads to a second organizing strategy—namely, that the Boggs School is a unionized, nonprofit public charter that provides an alternative education model to standardized DPS curriculum. This formal organizational strategy aligns the Boggs School with Albert Shanker’s progressive idea for charter education in the United States. Shanker served as president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 to 1997, and in his 1988 speech to the National Press Club proposed a program for charter schools:

they would be formed by teachers creating a “school within a school,” eventually become autonomous schools specializing in alternative pedagogy, and ultimately be regulated by community consensus and the union collective bargaining agreement (12-16).⁴ Although his idea was co-opted by the school reform movement, one consequence being the prevalence of non-unionized, for-profit charter schools, the Boggs School subscribes to Shanker’s framework. In addition to the fact that the school’s teachers and staff are organized under the AFT Michigan ACTS, the Boggs School co-founders have organized the school—its structure, its pedagogy, and its governance—around the dual issues of school closures and urban reform. Following Shanker, the Boggs School is guided by the central tenets of empowering teachers and promoting diversity. By design, the teachers experiment with place-based pedagogy, a model of education that challenges the factory school paradigm by emphasizing local community issues and civic engagement projects, and the teachers build classrooms that encourage creative, critical, and cooperative learning.

In an interview with Amy Goodman for *Democracy Now*, co-founder Nate Walker articulates their political strategy as a specific response to DPS school closures and the institution of charters operated by corporate management companies. The first part of their strategy is based in community activism: “We are trying to organize a vision for a new type of neighborhood school, because if neighborhood schools are closing, we are trying to figure out how we can set up a school in our neighborhood that considers the voice of the community. And so we hope to organize folks around that idea and around this neighborhood school” (Goodman). The second part of their strategy is curricular reform—schooling based on the premise of project learning and community involvement. Whereas education reform has required that schools become more test-oriented, almost exclusively pairing student achievement with standardized test scores, the Boggs School instead prioritizes student portfolios, self-reflections, and the practical skills learned through real-life situations. More specifically, this methodology, curriculum, and assessment are based on the program of place-based education.

Place-Based Education in Detroit

Similar to the Detroit Summer program that provided crucial context for the planning of the Boggs School, PBE is also modeled on civic engagement. According to the Rural School and Community Trust, the objective of the PBE model is:

Learning rooted in what is local—the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning. This local focus has the power to engage students academically, pairing real-world relevance with intellectual rigor, while promoting genuine citizenship and preparing people to respect and live well in the community they choose. (Smith and Sobel 23)

David Sobel argues that because this pedagogical model emphasizes practical, real-world learning experiences, PBE outcomes “increase academic achievement, help students develop stronger ties to their community, enhance students appreciation for the natural world, and create a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens” (Sobel 7). Although PBE originated in rural schools, a number of educators in Detroit have identified ways in which this pedagogy can be localized to the city’s specific urban needs and problems. Shari Saunders, Professor of Educational Practice at the University of Michigan, argues that violence, foreclosures, the waste incinerator, and access to healthy food could serve as points of entry, and that potential community partners for PBE in DPS include the Black Community Food Security Network, significantly a community organization already involved with the Boggs Center and Detroit Summer (“Place-Based Education”). In this context, the curriculum for the Boggs School incorporates place-based learning focusing on the school’s neighborhood: math and science concepts will be learned through school gardening, history through the history of the east side neighborhood, and language skills through transcribing neighborhood residents’ oral histories (Kuras).

In addition to staffing teachers for the K-5 classrooms, the Boggs School also includes two other positions as a part of their classroom teacher team, an intervention teacher and community liaison and a special education instructor. To complement the work that the students do in the classroom, the school also employs several community educators who teach elective subjects like creative arts, physical education, urban agriculture, hip hop, Spanish, Music Together, and keyboarding. All of these positions incorporate PBE curriculum to teach more standard K-5 learning outcomes. Halima Cassells, a Boggs School parent and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network Community Outreach Coordinator, has described the way this pedagogy shaped her daughter's first year at the school. Significant to her daughter was that the term began with the class creating a class social contract—the first lesson of the semester emphasizing the importance of figuring out how to treat one another over more conventional homework assignments. And to teach the importance of community involvement, Cassells' daughter and her classmates participated in many of the Boggs School's 20 field trips to museums, galleries, gardens, and other schools, where the students helped, added to, or co-created something with their community collaborators (Cassells).

One such example of community interaction was the Boggs School's hosting of "The Sophie Wright Celebration Day" on December 5, 2014. This event served two goals: the school community celebrated the history of their school building, the Sophie Wright Settlement House, learning about its connection to the U.S. Settlement House Movement; and the oral history club interviewed neighborhood residents to record their memories of the way the Sophie Wright Settlement House influenced political activism, social services, and community building in Detroit through the 1950s (De Palma). In this PBE lesson, students learned that the settlement established in their building provided kindergarten classes and a nursery program for poor students, free lunches to students who could not travel home for meals, after school classes for children, and educational programs for adults. They also learned about the importance of intergenerational dialogue, where the oral history recordings of family and community members serve as another kind of education that complements what they study in school. Taken together, the Boggs School community underlined that the school is continuing the political activism and community organizing significant to their Detroit east side neighborhood's history.

Localizing education in this way becomes an opportunity to engage in multiple forms of activism. It offers a viable alternative to the factory model paradigm of standardized education, as well as the corporate managerial models common to the school reform movement. It also provides an entry point to critique the effects of globalization, specifically when local communities and civic activism are put in tension with transnational corporations and global capitalism. In this context, "The Sophie Wright Celebration Day" is a direct link between the model of place-based education taught at the Boggs School and the history of liberatory pedagogy coming from movement work.

Indeed, although the school operates under Shanker's framework for a public, unionized charter, it is also important to highlight the ways that the Boggs School also draws from radical African American political traditions. While there is a racist history associated with the U.S. charter school movement, there are also historical precedents for black community activists involved in movement work to demand community-control of schools—to expand curriculum to include Black Studies, to support the hiring of African American teachers consistent with a school's social geography, and to reject both standardized testing and promotion-by-examination. In this context, Shanker's conflict with the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board in 1968 is an instructive contrast; he supported the union contract to the exclusion of the historically black community's educational and cultural concerns.⁵ In this respect, the Boggs School is instructive for how they extend the struggles of black activism by making diverse community alignments and articulating different forms of solidarity.

As was previously discussed, the Boggs School was built upon the model of Detroit Summer, which for over twenty years has attempted to address the crisis in U.S. cities by developing new modes of thinking and new forms of political organization. Grace Lee Boggs was vocal that the legacy of the Freedom Schools and the Black Power movement influenced the grassroots organization of Detroit Summer. In turn, the progressive model of education at the Boggs School was influenced by the education policies of

this movement work. Importantly, the efforts of activists in each of these movements situate national educational policy and local education issues within a larger systematic critique. To varying degrees, they also situate education and school policies as one example of the exploitation inherent in the capitalist system.

The Freedom Schools were established in the South in the summer of 1964 as a component of the civil rights movement's Freedom Summer. The political, social, and economic objectives of the Freedom Schools were to register voters and educate black students for social change. The idea behind this dual focus was that in order to end political disenfranchisement and displacement students must be educated on the importance of becoming active citizens involved in the community. As the civil rights movement evolved, particularly with the development of black power activism, proponents advocated the building of racially separate schools, communities, and states to fight institutional racism, cure systemic problems, and address daily needs (Joseph 754). For example, the Black Panther Party founded the Free Breakfast for Children program and the Intercommunal Youth Institute, each program providing students with free busing, meals, school supplies, medical checkups, and clothing while educating them on the conditions of the black community. Other black power activists advocated for educational reform centered on the slogans "Black Control of Black Schools" and "Community Control of Schools" (J. Boggs and G. Boggs, *Education* 6-7).

In addition to offering historical context for the Boggs School, these programs situate the school within an activist political tradition and serve as models for the school's teachers to educate, agitate, and organize within the Detroit Public School system. In particular, two events directly shaped the theory and practice of the Boggs School, and more specifically the ways it responded to both the local context of Detroit's specific education reforms and the larger national neoliberal education policies: Charlie Cobb's 1963 proposal for Freedom Schools and the Boggses' 1971 publication of the *Education to Govern* pamphlet on behalf of the All-African People Union. Here, I will discuss the ways in which the praxis of these 1960s and 1970s examples provide a model for the Boggs School organization, curriculum, and activist history. These contexts illustrate how schools can be spaces both for revolutionary pedagogy and political critique, and indeed how each of these tasks is not mutually exclusive.

As an organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Cobb proposed the Freedom School program to address the gross inadequacy of Mississippi's public education system, which for black students, because of institutional racism, was the worst education in the United States. Cobb argued that Mississippi's schools were "burdened with virtually a complete absence of academic freedom, and students [were] forced to live in an environment [geared] to squash intellectual curiosity, and different thinking" (101). As such, Cobb challenged SNCC and other civil rights activists to overcome the lack of decent facilities, comprehensive curriculum, fully qualified teachers, and educational materials by offering a summer program to provide both formal academic training and lessons in civic engagement:

The aim of the Freedom School curriculum will be to challenge the student's curiosity about the world, introduce him to his particularly "Negro" cultural background, and teach him basic literacy skills in one integrated program. That is, the students will study problem areas in their world, such as the administration of justice, or the relation between state and federal authority. Each problem will be built around a specific episode which is close to the experiences of the students. (105)

The curriculum for this program would consist of three subject areas: the presentation of conventional academic subjects; citizenship curriculum to include leadership and development training for SNCC and other community organizations; and cultural activities like creative writing, drama, and talent shows. In sum, the pedagogy would focus on student experiences and student insights on school projects that had both an academic and real-world context. The goal of this pedagogy would be to produce active citizens who see themselves as part of a larger social movement.⁶ As Rick and William Ayers have noted, a student-oriented classroom that approaches education as community organizing and community empowerment, and not as the simple transmission of static knowledge from above, facilitates a liberationist pedagogy in which student self-actualization becomes a mechanism to transform social relations (19-20).

In *Education to Govern* (1971), James and Grace Lee Boggs build upon the Freedom Schools program, incorporating it with the culturalist ideas of the Black Power movement. Several factors influenced their turn to education and their positioning of it as central to the theory and practice of their revolutionary program—the deindustrialization of Detroit, the outsourcing of labor overseas, the mass incarceration of African Americans, white flight to the suburbs, and the decentralization of schools.⁷ More specifically, another reason the Boggsses turned to education as a key component of their revolutionary program—here “revolution” defined in terms of their political philosophy as “the complete reorganization of society”—was the 1970s racial re-segregation of Detroit schools from those in the suburbs.⁸ On this issue, the Supreme Court decided in their 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* ruling that Michigan school districts could not be voluntarily dismantled to ensure the desegregation of Detroit schools when there was no evidence of *de facto* segregation (“Civil Rights in History”). That is to say, because school segregation was a result of other structural conditions, and not direct segregation policies, this education inequity was not illegal.

The Boggsses were explicit that the failures of the education system were both a condition and an effect of the U.S. economic system, arguing that “the educational system, like the American capitalist system of which it is an integral part, operates against the interests of the community—precisely because it encourages the ambitious individual to climb the economic and social ladder out of the community” (*Education* 1). After surveying the various programs offered to address the problems of the educational system—“such band-aids as MORE MONEY, or MORE POLICE, or MORE SCHOOLS, or MORE PARENT INVOLVEMENT, or MORE TEACHERS, or MORE TIME IN SCHOOL”—the Boggsses articulated their philosophy of education suitable to the changing political, social, and economic conditions of 1970s Detroit (6).

The Boggsses’ new system of education addressed both theoretical and practical struggles, working to “redefine the function of education in order to make it responsive and accountable to the community” (*Education* 24). In theory and practice, this would require both that schools be functionally reorganized to become centers of community and that community issues become their curriculum. Putting these goals in tension, the curriculum of their proposed school would not emphasize traditional subjects, but instead an educational program based in civic engagement and problem-based pedagogy. Their curriculum required that students work in teams to “identify the needs or problems of the community; choose a certain need or problem as a focus of activity; plan a program for its solution; and carry out the steps involved in the plan” (25). In turn, this methodology would emphasize a model of education distinct from the instrumental learning of the factory model of education. For example, their education plan centered on distinct teaching objectives and learning outcomes: history is evolutionary and is shaped by conscious purposes and plans; productive work effectively teaches critical thinking skills and the relationship between manual and mental activities; developing political and technical skills facilitates individual consciousness and social change; emphasizing a variety of resources, environments, and cultures provides a critical context for globalization; training in preventative healthcare and holistic living will challenge society’s bend toward automation and specialization; and schools must educate productive citizens who work for social change (34-36). The culmination of *Education to Govern* is this final principle. To overcome the social, economic, and political challenges of postindustrial society, education must emphasize human development over economic development. For the Boggsses, localizing education to community-specific issues allows students to develop the skills necessary to make productive contributions to the whole society, and thus educating students to govern in the interests of the people, not governmental or corporate interests. Significantly, whereas the Freedom Schools were a part of SNCC’s grassroots campaign in Mississippi, the Boggsses’ radical education plan was not put into practice until the 1990s Detroit Freedom Summer programs, then with subtle distinctions.

Taken together, the influence of the civil rights movement and black radical politics on the Boggs School, includes adapting the curriculum, methods, and objectives of Cobb’s and the Boggsses’ programs to the contemporary context of K-12 U.S. education. In addition, both the Boggs School and the Freedom Schools reformulated the very concept of education and schooling. In both contexts, education functions in a number of registers: it mediates particular needs and problems with universal rights and values; it negotiates abstract ideas, learning outcomes, and pedagogical philosophies with practical activity, real-

world learning, and civic engagement; it connects individual students to their families, communities, nation, and world; and it explains the social context of relationships and systems of relation across local and global scales.⁹ For all of these reasons, the problem and solution, form and function of education is cultural. As such, educational programs like the Boggs School challenge the tenets of neoliberal education reform: in creating an educational institution that privileges critical thinking and community empowerment over standardized testing and measurable knowledge, the school's administrators, teachers, and community organizers extend the classroom into the city, if not erasing the boundaries between school and neighborhood, certainly blurring their distinction. Therefore, if the goal of liberatory pedagogy in the twentieth century was a system that emphasized the importance of "education to govern," its goal in the twenty-first century is to advocate "solutionary thinking," a model of education learned in the classroom that intervenes in the daily life of local communities.

Grassroots Organizing as "Solutionary Thinking"

The "solutionary thinking" advocated by the Boggs School represents the convergence of community work, parent involvement, progressive education reform, and radical teaching. While Arne Duncan called Detroit Public Schools "ground zero" for the Obama administration's corporate "reform" agenda—privileging standardized testing, mandating teacher accountability, closing public schools, and increasing the numbers of for-profit charters—the Boggs School offers critical resistance to all of these measures.

In the first place, the school emphasizes democracy in theory and in practice; its place-based education privileges solutionism that is bottom-up, emphasizing the importance of local community and civic engagement. Here, the word choice of "solutionary thinking" and "solutionism" is a specific critique of technocratic neoliberal education policy. While solutionary thinking and solutionism are typically associated with the belief that individual and social problems can be solved by way of a technological fix, the terms are strategically redefined by the teachers, educators, and community activists associated with the Boggs School. Instead of privileging a problem-solution heuristic that is exclusively technology-driven, the Boggs School advocates a problem-based pedagogy that incorporates technology into a curriculum that emphasizes learning through service projects in the community, the development of technical skills relevant to the needs and problems of that community, and a transition from school-related civic engagement to social responsibility, social consciousness, and active citizenship. To that end, in various forums, educators advocating the Boggs School mission and core ideology of place-based education have labeled themselves as "the solutionaries we've been looking for," or identified the school's students "as solutionaries [who] are going to help create our future" (G. Boggs, "Solutionary Educators"; Krueger).

Secondly, the school's curriculum emphasizes critical thinking, interdisciplinarity, and collaborative learning. Student assessment does not privilege data-driven results or "obsolete teaching and learning methods created for the age of industrialization and entrenched in public schools [that] no longer work in our post-industrial society" (G. Boggs, *Next American Revolution* 136). Put differently, the school's particular focus on urban gardening, the local food movement, and urban reform counters the strategies of neoliberalism, gentrification, and disaster or casino capitalism (vis-à-vis Naomi Klein and Henry Giroux). In this context, the Boggs School functions as a case study on sustainability—how resistance to the educational-industrial complex might create a paradigm shift in which education continues to be a public good.

The solutionary thinking advocated by the Boggs School becomes a heuristic to learn the community organizing skills central to the Boggses' philosophy and activism. In a global context, the work of the school community to organize against external social conditions and internal group contradictions, first by resisting the austerity measures of DPS emergency management and then by building a grassroots charter engaged in activist schooling, is a necessary step toward revolutionizing the education system. However, the success of this project requires that students reject the financialization of their daily lives, opting out of the market logic that ranks them as students, values them in terms of their economic potential, determines

their social conditions, and constructs their social relations. On a local level, solutionary thinking is the foundational tools for this activist schooling, raising student consciousness, relating student experience to community relations, providing a model of institutional critique, and teaching grassroots organizing skills. If neoliberal agendas have sought to undermine the relationship between knowledge and power, education and social justice, the activist schooling of the Boggs School insists upon their connection.

To return a final time to the example of “The Sophie Wright Celebration Day,” we can see a case study for how critical thinking demonstrates solutionary thinking. The event taught the Boggs School students several important lessons: they learned about the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century settlement houses, they learned about some of the personal experiences the members of the neighborhood community had with Detroit settlement houses, they learned the history of their school building, and they learned about the importance of working with their community. The oral history club event drew from principles of asset-based community development, a model of civic engagement that emphasizes the importance of local assets—including, the skills of local residents, the power of local associations, and the support of local institutions—to build sustainable communities (ABCD). The community members that the students interviewed explained that the Sophie Wright House had historically been a part of a thriving local community: the settlement house was at the center of a community that supported local businesses, connected walkable neighborhoods, and allowed people to meet and interact with neighbors and build community (Apiary Projects).

According to Laura De Palma, the Director of the Boggs School Oral History Project, this kind of community engagement activity implements place-based pedagogy to encourage solutionary thinking. These critical thinking lessons are modeled in the students’ responses: second-grader, Athena Baker remarked that this interaction allowed her “to learn about the kind of history I needed to learn”; and third-grader, Na’Kyah Adjuman’s reflected that “I joined the Oral History Club to learn about my ancestors and what they experienced, so that I can learn from what they have done and it can help me do things in my future” (De Palma). Indeed, these are the first crucial steps toward practicing the Boggses’ radical educational program described in *Education to Govern*. In the context of the oral history exchange, the curriculum of the school quite literally becomes the community. But perhaps more important are the political effects of this critical pedagogy: the students learn that history, communities, and citizens matter, and they do so through the model of neighborhood organizing. As Athena, Na’Kyah, and their schoolmates become solutionaries, they can build upon these lessons not only to ask why their east side neighborhood has been a place of economic disadvantage and social reform, but also to imagine alternative conditions to end the inequality of education, resources, and bodies altogether.

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NOTES

¹ This history of the Boggs School comes from a compilation of sources, including: Julia Putnam, “Another Education is Happening”; Megan Krueger, “Julia Putnam, Principal of the Grace Lee Boggs School”; and Amy Kuras, “City Kids: High-Quality Charter Schools Await Detroit Families.”

² Here, and throughout the essay, the timeline of the Boggs School draws on the following two resources: Putnam, “Another Education is Happening,” and The Boggs School, “Project Timeline.”

³ The Eastern Michigan University authorization also complements the Boggs School mission and ideology in other ways. For example, EMU actively seeks to authorize charters that will serve students from economically disadvantaged households: 79 percent of the students enrolled in EMU charter schools meet this criterion, compared to 47 percent statewide. See, Malverne Winborne, “Charter Schools at Eastern Michigan University: An Overview.”

⁴ For a more detailed history of the charter school movement in the United States, see Diane Ravitch, “The Contradictions of Charters,” *Reign of Error*, pp.156-179.

⁵ For more history on the Shanker and Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflict, see: Richard Kahlenberg’s *Tough Liberal*, and Megan Erickson’s “The Strike that Didn’t Change New York.”

⁶ Grace Lee Boggs reiterates the importance of Freedom Schools for developing the student citizenship in many publications, including: “Freedom Schooling” in *Another Education is Possible* and “A Paradigm Shift in our Concept of Education.”

⁷ For a detailed discussion about the effects of deindustrialization on African-American communities, see James Boggs, “The City is the Black Man’s Land,” pp. 162-170.

⁸ For an extended discussion of the Boggses’ political philosophy of “revolution,” see *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 15-22.

⁹ For an extended discussion of culture and its power to challenge the tenets of neoliberal discourse, see Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return*, pp. 112-126.

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