Harlem’s Schools in the Great Depression:
The Promise of the Agenda for Education in a Democracy in an Educational Dystopia

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Abstract: In the wake of a destructive urban riot in 1935, New York City conducted public hearings on the challenges of schools in Harlem during the Great Depression. The provocative glimpse of the intersection of race, class, and education combined with the recent conclusions of the Agenda for Democracy in Education Scholars reveal the unfulfilled potential for educational renewal in communities such as Harlem. They also suggest the current need for meaningful collaboration between schools, universities, and, most importantly, an engaged American public in the form of broad alliances that enrich democracy both within and beyond schools.

On March 19, 1935 the New York City police arrived at a retail store in Harlem in response to an incident involving a teenager accused of shoplifting. Although the boy was soon released unhurt, confusion, anger, and cries of police brutality and racial injustice within Harlem quickly fueled a large urban riot that resulted in three deaths, over two hundred injured, and substantial arrests and property damage. The riot led to a massive police presence in Harlem and New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia created the Mayor’s Commission on Conditions in Harlem (MCCH). After months of hearings and often controversial delays, the MCCH concluded in 1936 that the riot was the destructive result of “pent-up feelings of resentment and insecurity” tied to employment discrimination, poverty, and police
brutality. (MCCH, 1936: 109) Although racial segregation and limited economic opportunities plagued the community even during the cultural flowering of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, the riot, according to African-American writer Alain Locke, was a “revealing flash of lightning” that signaled Harlem’s transition from the capital of black America to a racialized urban ghetto. (Locke, 1936: 457).

While the MCCH's lengthy investigation and other accounts of the riot centered on issues such as employment, housing, crime, and health, the commission also conducted provocative and unprecedented public hearings on the state of education in Harlem. (Education Hearing, April 9-10, 1935) Chaired by Oswald Garrison Villard, a white civil rights activist who was one of the founders of the NAACP and the grandson of the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, the subcommittee on education also included black author Countee Cullen and two clergy representing both African American and white churches. For two days in April 1935 the subcommittee listened as teachers, parents, and other members of the community painted a vivid portrait of an educational dystopia in what African Americans called the “Promised Land” of the North. Almost eight decades later this portrait highlights the historical context for our greatest obstacles to the creation of schools that promote a democratic society as defined most recently by the Agenda for Democracy (AED) Scholars and the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER). Just as importantly, amid the seemingly unparalleled challenges of Harlem schools in the 1930s lay the unfulfilled promise of schools and communities that promote democratic citizenship. The problems and possibilities of Harlem’s educational past underscore the current need for meaningful collaboration between schools, universities, and most importantly, an engaged American public with the aim of forging broad alliances that enrich democracy both within and beyond schools.

Since 1985, the NNER has forged robust school-university partnerships throughout the United States and Canada to promote the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. Such partnerships promote “educational experiences and institutions necessary to a healthy, renewing social and political democracy.” (http://ieiseattle.org/index.htm) Reflecting the NNER’s comprehensive approach to education, the

1 Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes are from the Educational Hearings, April 9-10, 1935, pages unnumbered, Oswald Garrison Villard Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.
most recent working papers of the organization’s AED Scholars group identified the following as “four of the larger issues that frustrate our efforts to develop the good society” that both reflect and sustain a democratic culture:

1. “Gross inequities in virtually every component of the nation’s system of public education.”
2. “Inattention to the huge body of information we have about individual differences among humans.”
3. “The general failure of policymakers, professionals, and the general public to work together in a common vision for the public purposes of education in a democracy.”
4. “The continued failure” to understand the importance of “nonintentional and intentional educating by forces other than our schools.” (Michelli, Goodlad, Ball, Mester, Pacheco, 2009: 4)

Harlem in the 1930s provided more daunting challenges than anything educators and citizens face today in attempting to create the “good society.” (Michelli, 2009: 3) The economic casualties of the Great Depression coupled with the realities of race and class in New York City produced unemployment rates over 60% in Harlem and higher rates of disease and mortality than the rest of the city. (Greenberg, 1991) Already marginalized economically in what journalist Roi Ottley called the “crucible of a segregated life,” African Americans suffered the most during the depression as they had less access to private and public resources. (1943, p. 2) In 1933 one study concluded that medium family income for African American families in Harlem dropped almost in half from 1929 to 1933. The following year another study indicated that 43% of African Americans in Harlem were on relief. (McDowell, 1984, 136) Blacks received a disproportionate amount of public relief due to widespread poverty and yet also faced racial discrimination in areas related to employment, social work, private charities, the judicial system, and government programs associated with the New Deal. Families faced a housing crisis in which African Americans paid higher rents for increasingly inadequate, unsafe, and unsanitary homes. The New York Urban League reported 10-20 evictions per day in Harlem in 1931 (Greenberg, 1991: 46) while others lived in homeless shelters or what Ottley described as “unheated railroad flats.” (1943, 154)
While the AED Scholars’ discussion of inequality of public education encompassed far more than school facilities, the physical state of Harlem’s schools was the most tangible expression of an educational system that the AED Scholars referred to as “morally bankrupt” and a threat to “the public democratic aims of our society.” (Rios, Foster, Maaka, Urban, 2009: 3) Most of the participants in the hearings testified about significant problems of overcrowding in Harlem’s schools due to immigration from the Caribbean and decades of what historians refer to as the Great Migration of southern blacks to the urban North. Observers noted that the city had not built a new elementary school in the community since 1909 and revealed that, despite a request in 1934 for federal funds for 168 new school buildings in the city, the plan included only a single annex for Harlem. As a result, most schools in Harlem in the 1930s held two, if not three, separate sessions per day due to overcrowding and still had elementary classrooms with up to 50 students. Testimony described school facilities that lacked indoor toilets and washrooms, auditoriums, playgrounds, lunch rooms, adequate books, and, in one case, a functioning roof. One school, PS 90, had 175 chairs in the lunchroom to accommodate a thousand students during a one-hour lunch period. Two other schools, PS 10 and 168, provided only “unheated outdoor toilets.” Just days after the hearings in April 1935 a community organization identified six Harlem schools in the New York Amsterdam News as “firetraps.” The article added that, just hours after the announcement, another fire broke out at a seventh school. (“Six Schools Fire Hazards,” 1935).

Although schools in Harlem were notoriously overcrowded with students, the buildings also lacked adequate support staff such as additional teachers, administrators, special educators, and school psychologists. One school, PS 90, reportedly had two sessions with a total of 3038 students and only one principal. This was especially important as many of the students also faced challenges that the AED Scholars recently identified as the “life conditions” of children within many marginalized communities. (Rios et al. 2009: 3) One parent organization concluded that many students suffered from “physical, mental, and moral injuries inflicted by the depression” and teachers commented on specific problems such as malnourishment, tuberculosis, and students without shoes and eye glasses. Others described how schools had no resources to address what they referred to as “retardation” or “over-aged boys and girls” whose educational experiences in Harlem or the Jim Crow South left them ill prepared for their grade level.
The AED Scholars also stressed the recognition of diversity within a democratic society and the need for schools to provide “access to knowledge, nurturing pedagogy,” and teachers who serve as “stewards of schools” and model “democratic practice.” (Keiser, Chaplin, Gehrke, McDaniel, and Robison, 2009: 3) Decades earlier the testimony in 1935 also included evidence that African American teachers and community members perceived the curriculum and instruction in Harlem as fundamentally undemocratic in its inability to meet the needs of children. Teachers criticized the city’s use of “ancient” materials and “books that ridicule blacks.” One parent organization concluded that “many of the city teachers are totally ignorant of facts about the Negro race and colonial peoples” and, together with some of the teachers, recommended that “courses in Negro history should be compulsory.” Witnesses described schools that routinely steered African American students toward preparation for jobs in only domestic and manual labor. One parent explained how a teacher asked a student, “Why do you want to take Latin? You better study cooking.” In one school for girls, Wadleigh High School, 75% of black students were tracked into courses in dressmaking and “domestic science” while courses designed to “prepare girls for the outstanding women’s colleges” did not include a single black student. Mrs. Eddie Aspinall, the executive director of the Central Committee of Harlem Parents Associations, demanded nothing short of substantial change through an “educational reconstruction.” She warned that parents rejected older efforts “to discover so-called ‘ethnic peculiarities’ [of Harlem’s students] and then lower the standards of education.” The testimony was so convincing that the Mayor’s Commission’s final report, which was often full of dry, bureaucratic language, criticized teachers in Harlem who “know nothing of Negroes except in the role of servants, clowns, or criminals.” (MCCH, 1936: 79) The report added that “no one who is dominated by traditional beliefs concerning the Negro’s capacity for intellectual culture or his proper place in society is fit to counsel him in his choice of a career.” (MCCH, 1936: 77)

While contemporary teacher education emphasizes the need to train teachers who reflect American diversity, the hearings in Harlem indicated that many schools, despite a student population that was nearly 100% African American, lacked teachers and administrators of color. For example, at PS 184 95% of students were African American or Puerto Rican and yet all 80 teachers and the principal were white. Soon after the Mayor’s Commission issued its report in 1936, parent groups
in Harlem demanded that the city appoint its first African American to the Board of Education. This request went unheeded for many years and in 1943 the New York Amsterdam News explained that the issue remained the crucial “test of the Mayor’s belief in democracy for the Negro in New York City.” (Malliet, 1943:4)

Although administrative and teaching positions remained scarce for African Americans and Latinos, there were some teachers of color by 1935 and the subcommittee asked repeatedly about the existence of racial tension between staff members in Harlem’s schools. Some participants expressed satisfaction with one teacher concluding that “there is no color line” and that African American and white teachers “work beautifully together.” However, much of the testimony in 1935 was replete with concerns about the lack of “teachers conversant with the difficulties facing the negro child and genuinely interested in their well-being.” More than one witness criticized the racism of some white teachers with one suggesting a larger atmosphere of intolerance as evidenced by teachers who called African American students “monkeys or gorillas; the Italians, wops; and the Jews, sheenies.” At least one such accusation included school administrators. Roy Wilkins, a journalist who later became the executive director of the NAACP, criticized Mabel Thresher, the principal of PS 90, for allegedly describing Harlem as an “Amos and Andy community.” Wilkins claimed that “scores of white teachers” … “perceive adults in Harlem as “Sambos” and “Aunt Jemimas” and their students as “pickaninnies.” For Wilkins, the lack of Jim Crow racial segregation in the North only underscored the tragedy of allowing “our boys and girls to be given an Alabama education.” (Wilkins, 1936:14)

In 2009 the AED Scholars identified the inability of Americans to agree upon a common purpose of American education as a key obstacle to educational reform. (Potthaff, Mantle-Bromley, Clark, Kleinsasser, Badiali, and Baugh, 2009: 3)

Although Americans have long embraced the notion of education as an important ingredient in American democracy, some perceived public schools as central to preserving the status quo and creating productive American workers. In contrast, others, including the NNER, have viewed education as about civic engagement and an avenue for changing society to better reflect our nation’s highest ideals about democracy, equality, and opportunity. With regard to blacks and education in the 1930s the contours of this debate emerged as a much older battle between those who advocated industrial or vocational education for African American such
as Booker T. Washington and others such as W.E. B. Du Bois who argued that a commitment to a liberal arts education would improve race relations. In 1915 Du Bois criticized industrial education as an “insidious, persistent attempt” to preserve the nation’s racial hierarchy and “part of the great modern attack upon democracy.” (Du Bois, 1915:132) In contrast to industrial education, Du Bois perceived a liberal arts education as, according to historian David Levering Lewis, “the master key to collective empowerment” and crucial for addressing the social problems that plagued many African American communities. (Lewis, 1993: 261)

The older model reflected the rigidly segregated South of the late nineteenth century while efforts to prepare black students for white-collar employment and even higher education symbolized the new demands of a modern, industrial society in the urban North. No place symbolized new experiences for African Americans more than Harlem and by the mid twentieth century the debate over education was grounded in a larger discussion about the role of race in American democracy. In his influential tome, The American Dilemma, Swedish socialist Gunner Myrdal argued that most Americans believed in the “American Creed” or faith in “liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity.” (Myrdal, 1944: xlviii) Myrdal suggested that what many Americans, both white and black, often referred to as the “negro problem” in the twentieth century was more accurately identified as the dominant culture’s internal conflict between this American Creed and the nation’s racist history, ideas, and institutions.

During a period often characterized by President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and unprecedented efforts to use federal power to address social problems, there is no evidence in the Commission’s investigation that policy makers, educators, and parents shared a common vision about the purpose of public education in Harlem and its relationship with American democracy. In fact, as inadequate as the school facilities and curriculum in Harlem were during the Great Depression, perhaps the most striking feature of the often provocative testimony from teachers and parents was descriptions of an educational climate that, in the words of one teacher, made “no pretense at democracy.” Students and parents were frustrated with facilities, curriculum, and instruction that were hardly conducive to, according to the AED Scholars, “enculturing the young into a social and political democracy.” (Potthaff, 2009: 8) One parent even made the explicit link between facilities and democracy in criticizing schools that lacked an auditorium and were
therefore incapable of holding “a successful assembly, so necessary for training in citizenship.”

Not surprisingly, public hearings that addressed subjects such as urban riots, race relations, police brutality, organized labor, and even the existence of political radicalism in New York City had the potential to be explosive. The Commission's final report commented on the “aroused public” and the challenge of holding “orderly public hearings” that allowed citizens to “express justified expression of popular resentment against existing conditions.” However, it is telling that the only closed hearings held by the commission in 1935 involved “teachers who were unwilling to expose themselves to possible reprisals.” (MCCH, 1936: 15) Teachers in Harlem were clear that they had no “freedom of speech” and lacked any opportunity to offer constructive criticism of the city’s schools. Administrators viewed teaching assignments in Harlem as a punishment. As one teacher explained, “Teachers shouldn’t be threatened by principals with the statement, ‘I’ll have to send you to a Harlem colored school until you learn to teach.’” Numerous witnesses criticized the lack of black teachers, administrators, and members of the school board necessary for, according to one participant, “democratic participation in school affairs.” One community leader explained that claims of racial discrimination in hiring and placement were difficult to confirm as it was “impossible” for the concerned community activists to “get the true facts concerning the schools.” Overall, the public hearings demonstrated that students in Harlem spent their childhood in schools that, in the words of the AED Scholars, had a “deep structure” that was fundamentally undemocratic in that it systematically marginalized students, teachers, and parents. (Michelli, 2009: 2)

As one witness explained, she hoped that the commission would “go into the schools in Harlem as compared to others, and meet the smell, feel the terror and lack of freedom.”

Of course, the challenges of public education in Harlem and the lives of students were never independent of the complex and persistent problems of the larger community. As the AED Scholars argued in 2009, education has always transcended schools in that larger social and cultural forces, both positive and negative, contribute to the “conventional wisdom and dominant behavior” of Americans. (Anderson, Skillings, Wood, Wilson, and Rosenberg, 2009: 2) While Anderson and others described positive “educative forces” such as civic
organizations, the dominant narrative of the public hearings in 1935 emphasized what the AED Scholars identified as “Mis-Educative Forces” of the “dark side of social capital.” (Anderson, 2009: 5). Reflecting a larger pattern in which local authorities tolerated crime in certain areas of the city, gambling, bootlegging, drugs, prostitution, and police corruption were widespread in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s. Reformers expressed increasing concerns that the economic crisis of the period exacerbated problems such as tuberculosis and other diseases, the prevalence of single-parent families, child labor and neglect, and juvenile delinquency. The lack of affordable and adequate housing resulted in a reliance upon lodgers and, in the constant search for better housing, families and children who moved residences and schools frequently. In 1937 the homicide rate for Harlem was about seven times that of the rest of Manhattan and the Teachers Union described the larger educational atmosphere as involving “horrifying moral conditions.” (Greenberg, 1991:189) The Mayor’s Commission stressed that poor economic conditions in Harlem meant that many mothers worked and yet the community lacked sufficient recreational centers and was the only section of New York City without a nursery school. Six years later the New York Amsterdam News revisited the issue of schools in Harlem and found persistent problems related to the larger community. The newspaper explained that within a two-block radius of PS 89, a school that the Mayor’s Commission earlier recommended the city tear down, were “18 beer gardens, 6 liquor saloons, 4 moving picture houses, and two hotels alleged to be disreputable.” The article added that the area adjacent to the school also had “one solid block of rooming houses known to be the center of vice and the hideouts of the vendors and narcotics, and other criminals.” (Malliet, 1943:4)

At first glance the chasm between these poignant educational challenges of the past and the NNER’s utopian vision of the future might suggest that the value of exploring Harlem’s schools in the 1930s is limited. However, the educational hearings associated with the riot of 1935 are relevant to both our understanding of American history and the contemporary challenges of educational renewal. In terms of the history of American education, the events of 1935 provide poignant evidence of what historians have most recently termed the “long civil rights movement,” or the struggle for racial and economic justice that began well before the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education (1954) and included the persistent racial and class segregation of schools outside the Jim Crow South.
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The educational experiences of African-Americans in the urban North also suggest meaningful parallels and differences between newcomers to Harlem (southern migrants and West Indian immigrants) and the more familiar experiences of European immigrants in American schools in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Finally, the hearings illustrate the grassroots efforts of largely anonymous African Americans as they engaged many of the larger social, cultural, economic, and political forces that shaped the early decades of what educators and others now identify as urban education. All of this serves as a powerful corrective to the underlying assumption of educational reform in recent decades—that a harmonious, “golden age” of American education existed before the social turmoil of the sixties and seventies. (Ravitch, 2010: 253)

Perhaps more surprisingly, this portrait of an educational dystopia in Harlem during the Great Depression offers an instructive window through which to better understand our current challenges to remake our schools and American democracy. First, although academic journals such as the Journal of Urban Education did not concentrate on the unique characteristics of urban schools until the sixties and educators rarely spoke of diversity or multiculturalism, Harlem’s schools in 1935 illustrate how race, ethnicity, class, and language have long intersected with problems such as unemployment, inadequate housing, crime, and lack of access to health care within America’s poorest school districts. In contrast to the de jure racial segregation of schools in the South that dominate historical and political narratives of race and educational inequality, the de facto racial, class, and cultural segregation of New York City in the 1930s (Harlem contained over 55,000 foreign-born residents in 1930 alone) is far more relevant to the complex challenges of public education and social inequality in the twenty-first century. Recent efforts by political leaders in Arizona to suppress the teaching of Latino Studies in public schools echo the struggles of African Americans to promote a curriculum sensitive to the needs and aspirations of students of color. (http://www.teacheractivistgroups.org/tucson/) In recent years American educators have toiled in a larger culture that lacks the resources, coherent vision, and political will to support public schools, empower teachers as professionals, and address systemic inequality. The stark contrast between the resources and experiences of Harlem’s schools and the more affluent communities elsewhere in Manhattan also appears familiar to anyone alarmed about what the New York Times termed a “tectonic” shift in American
education in recent decades – the emergence of social class rather than race as the key determinant of educational achievement. (Tavernise, 2012) Finally, current demographic trends related to immigration, birth rates, and social class suggest that a key element in sustaining public education in the future will be the fragile willingness of older generations of largely white and relatively affluent Americans to fund schools filled with students who differ from themselves in terms of race and class. (Passel & Cohn, 2008)

As powerful as the public hearings on Harlem schools were during the Great Depression, what was conspicuously absent from the substantial discussion may be the most relevant today to the Agenda for Education in a Democracy. First, in over 60 pages of testimony and a final report of over 120 pages there was not a single reference to the role of teacher education in shaping public education. References to reforming curriculum or offering professional development for veteran teachers never suggested the value of partnerships with the larger community to address these needs. Even discussions of the quality and placement of teachers in Harlem revealed no evidence that teachers, parents, and members of the community perceived teacher education or higher education in general as part of the solution.

Second, the specific recommendations of community organizations, teachers, and the Mayor's Commission in the aftermath of the riot were noteworthy in their lack of attention to the larger context of education in Harlem. With the support of teacher organizations, the Central Committee of Harlem Parents Associations provided the commission with a ten-point program to “meet the crisis of education in Harlem.” Not surprisingly, the program recommended new schools, adequate lunchrooms, recreational centers, and new equipment. The organization also requested additional teachers, smaller classes, adult education, and a school for older children who had been retained. A year later the Mayor's Commission also published its own final list of seven recommendations. Five involved issues directly related to facilities. The remaining two recommendations involved hiring more teachers and using existing “social and government agencies” to assist in dealing with juvenile delinquency and child neglect. (MCCH, 1936: 117) Although the official commission on the riot addressed unemployment, crime and the police, housing, relief, and health, the recommendations on public schools were revealing in their narrow focus and lack of attention to the larger, systemic issues that continue to plague many American communities.
Similarly, the hearings in 1935 involved little recognition of the potential of “educative forces” within Harlem that had the potential to nurture democratic public institutions. Although Harlem in 1935 had many of the characteristics of what the AED Scholars recently described as “societal fragmentation,” the hearings failed to acknowledge what the authors also described as “trusting networks that serve as the webs of a vital community.” (Anderson, 2009: 4) Suggesting a holistic approach to improving education that includes families, peers, civic organizations, business, churches, and the media, the AED Scholars recommended a “simultaneous top-down as well as bottom-up process” in which Americans collaborate to promote schools, communities, and ultimately students that renew democracy. (Anderson, 2009: 3) Moving beyond decades of school wars over centralization and decentralization and more recent debates over school reform that emphasize school governance or classroom instruction, recent research concludes that the most effective schools promote what Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider refer to as “relational trust.” (2002: 12) In these settings the interaction between administrators, teachers, parents, and students reflect mutual respect, obligations, and decision making. In the end, improving American education depends on schools, communities, and their allies that model democratic ideals rather than high-stakes testing, privatization, or scapegoating public educators.

On the surface education in Harlem during the Great Depression appears to have fallen far short of these ideals. However, Harlem was full of strong organizations capable of supporting positive change in education. Churches thrived in Harlem and established organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, the United Negro Improvement Association, and the National Association of Colored Women were active in the community. The economic crisis of the thirties resulted in an array of groups that addressed larger economic, political, and social problems such as the Harlem Tenants League, the Negro Labor Committee, and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Organizations as varied as the Catholic Church, the Harlem Merchant’s Association, the Harlem Housewives League, and the communist party all vied for influence within the diverse communities that comprised Harlem. Citizens in Harlem were hardly passive or apathetic toward conditions in the community as over 4,000 residents marched in the streets to protest housing conditions in October 1936. ("4,000 March in Fight on Harlem
Rent Rise,” 1936) Six years later a much larger crowd of activists, perhaps as many as 20,000, filled Madison Square Garden to protest racial discrimination in the defense industry. (Smith, 1942) Furthermore, research on the early decades of the civil rights movement concludes that the preponderance of activists were middle class women, precisely the segment of society most often associated with local school reform. (Greene, 2005)

No effort in Harlem during the period better illustrates the untapped potential of the community to promote educational change better than the “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaign. Most of the businesses in Harlem in the 1930s were owned by whites from outside the community and the depression only intensified frustration with both increasing unemployment and a growing sense of exploitation of African American workers. Not unlike educational policy that was often created and controlled from outside Harlem, federal relief programs and New Deal efforts to create jobs also discriminated against African Americans and fueled social activism within Harlem that included well-organized boycotts, massive protests, and intensive labor organizing. Initially the focus of the effort was department stores that refused to hire African American clerks but eventually broadened to include insurance and utility companies. Despite huge obstacles such as scarce resources, internal divisions in terms of ideology and leadership, and significant opposition from business owners, City Hall, and the legal system, the campaign was successful in both highlighting racial discrimination and increasing employment opportunities in Harlem. More importantly, the campaign illustrated the organizing potential of even diverse and marginalized communities such as Harlem as African Americans and their allies embraced effective alliances and political mobilization.

What was needed was an organization to combine the surge of social activism in the thirties with an agenda to improve Harlem’s schools. That organization was the Teachers Union of New York City which existed since 1916. The union capitalized on the efforts of progressive educators from the Columbia Teacher’s College and the Committee on Intercultural Education, a group formed in 1935 which emphasized school curriculum and teacher training that reflected American diversity. The result was the Harlem Committee of the Teacher’s Union in fall 1935 and, in later years, broader coalitions such as the Permanent Committee for Better Schools in Harlem and the Citywide Citizens’ Committee on Harlem. (Johnson,
2004; Johanek, 1995) Above all, the Teachers Union and its allies advocated a broad agenda of educational reform that moved beyond facilities and employment issues to include curriculum in African American history, the racial integration of schools, and radical social change that promoted racial and economic justice. Beginning in 1937 the union foreshadowed the work of the NNER with conferences that declared, “Education for Democracy: Democracy in Education.” (Johnson, 2002: 572)

As historian Laurie Johnson has demonstrated, the Teachers Union eventually fell victim to the rabid anti-communism of the McCarthy era when conservatives, emboldened by the Cold War, attacked the union as “subversive and anti-American.” (Johnson, 2002: 582) The Board of Education banned the organization in 1950. However, its commitment to the principle that “If we are really to build democracy in American we must make all our institutions democratic” holds great promise as we work to renew American education in the twenty-first century. (Johnson, 2002: 579) The public hearings in the wake of the riot in Harlem and subsequent efforts at racial and economic justice both within and beyond public schools underscore the importance today of expanding the existing partnerships of the NNER. A more comprehensive approach is essential as education, like American democracy itself, is a complex, messy, and ongoing process with diverse stakeholders. Lasting solutions to contemporary educational challenges lie in creating broad meaningful coalitions—what Jane Roland Martin termed, “education writ large”—that include not just higher education and local schools, but also religious organizations, civic groups, business, the media, policy makers, private philanthropy, and political organizations. (Martin, 2008: 47) As Diane Ravitch argued in 2004, it is “imperative” that as a society we “reestablish the role of the public in public education.” (2004, A33)

This public renewal of education, similar to reflecting on the poignant story of Harlem’s schools during the Great Depression, illuminates how the education of our nation’s most marginalized communities and their children has long been a barometer of American democracy. John Goodlad’s claim that “the central problems are educational ones” holds true in both the thirties and the twenty-first century. (2008, 1) Just as the problems of education in Harlem in the thirties foreshadowed many of our more serious challenges today, we can also find inspiration in the promise of educational renewal and the AED Scholars’ vision of the “good
society” in even the direst conditions. Writing just months after the destructive riots, African American writer Alain Locke argued that Harlem had become a “Dark Weather-Vane” of race, class, and opportunity in the American democracy. (1936: 457) While the conditions of African Americans in Harlem could not “safely be ignored,” what was needed in the communities and schools of Harlem was not publicity but rather “constructive social care, fundamental community development and planning, and above all statesman-like civic handling.” (1936, 457-62, 493-5) Almost eight decades later the lessons of Harlem’s schools during the Great Depression continue to point us towards the continual, collaborative, and ultimately transformative work necessary today to renew our schools and enrich American democracy.

Works Cited


