WHAT MAKES A PUBLIC SCHOOL PUBLIC? A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATING THE CIVIC SUBSTANCE OF SCHOOLING

Chris Higgins

Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Kathleen Knight Abowitz

Department of Educational Leadership
Miami University

Anatomy of Inarticulateness

The phrase "public school" tends to evoke too little passion or too much. In everyday use, it has a bland and bureaucratic meaning. It refers simply to a school that is funded by tax dollars, overseen by elected officials, operating with open admissions within its district, and so on. However, when we sense that public schooling is under siege, in debates over vouchers for example, we may become less nominalistic and more idealistic. The trouble is that when we rush to the defense of the public schools, we are immediately overtaken by pieties: the public schools ensure an educated electorate; safeguard against the balkanization of the republic into class, racial, and religious groups; guarantee economic opportunity to those whose families are not well off and well connected. There is nothing wrong with these statements, except for the fact that they are all probably, more or less, false. The electorate is not particularly well educated. The United States is severely balkanized. And the poor seem to be getting poorer. If friends of these public ideals — people who care deeply about such notions of civic life, multicultural awareness, and equal opportunity — sometimes hesitate to ask whether the public schools actually make good on these public missions, it may be because there are so many who seem ready to seize any pretext to call the whole project into question. Between the banality of the phrase in some contexts and its sacredness in others, it is hard even to ask the most basic question: what makes a public school public?

Meanwhile, we can identify a further reason for our trouble in locating the public nature of public education, namely, that we tend to define public schooling by what it is not. It is not parochial schooling, and it does not instantiate a particular vision of the good life. To spell out in detail what makes public education public would be to go beyond saying simply what it keeps out (religion and other comprehensive conceptions of the good). To say what public schooling includes by way of substantive values might be perceived as violating the establishment clause, and so we often agree to leave the idea of the public school as a negative space.

In addition to these tendencies to think of public schooling as a bureaucratic fact, an inviolable creed, or a negative space required by liberal proceduralism,

there may be yet a deeper source for our difficulty in articulating what it means for the schools to have a public mission. For it may be that far from knowing what makes a public school public, we do not even know what the public itself is. Indeed, for some time now, social theorists have been warning of the disappearance of public space and the waning of civil society.[1] If public life has become severely attenuated, some argue, then ''the public'' is now a myth marshaled in the service of ideological ends.[2] Is talk of *public* schooling then a nostalgic indulgence that disguises its actual disappearance? Other social theorists counter that it is only a certain kind of public that has withered, that new forms of publicity are evolving as we speak.[3] In this view the public school is in flux, suffering the loss of old forms before rich, new ones have fully coalesced. Whether we are living after the eclipse of the public or during a phase of its rebirth and radical transformation, our uncertainty about the existence and meaning of the public can

---

1. The multidisciplinary, pessimistic chorus includes scholars from a range of fields: In philosophy, see John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1954); Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958), 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989). In urban studies, see Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) (New York: Vintage, 1992); and Margaret Kohn, *Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space* (New York: Routledge, 2004). In sociology, see in particular Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism* (New York: Random House, 1974); and Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Most notable in political science are Robert D. Putnam, ''Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital,'' *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995); and Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). And a number of other social theorists fall into this category, including Walter Lippmann, *The Phantom Public* (1925) (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1993); Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982) (New York: Penguin, 1988); and Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

2. See, for example, Alastair Hannay, *On the Public* (London: Routledge, 2005), 8.

3. See, for example, Joe Trippi, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Democracy, the Internet and the Overthrow of Everything* (New York: Regan Books, 2005); and the more measured Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006). For a different analysis, however, see Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001); Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009).

CHRIS HIGGINS is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education Policy, Organization, and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1310 S. Sixth St., Champaign, IL 61820; e-mail <crh4@illinois.edu>. His scholarship concerns the ethical dimensions of teacher identity, motivation, and development; transformative dialogue and the teacher-student relationship; and humanistic approaches to teaching, teacher education, and educational research.

KATHLEEN KNIGHT ABOWITZ is Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Miami University, 304 McGuffey Hall, Oxford, Ohio 45056; e-mail <knightk2@muohio.edu>. Her scholarship utilizes political and moral philosophy to explore questions of community, the public, and civic aspects of K–16 schooling.

only contribute to our inability to state clearly what it is that makes a public school public.

What does seem clear is that we can no longer rely either on tautologies (public schools are those schools in the public school system) or truisms (common schools bring us together). For better or for worse, the very project of the common school is being vigorously contested and dramatically redefined. Consider the advent of voucher plans; the dramatic rise of homeschooling; the corporate takeover of districts and schools; the ongoing pattern of resegregation; the new rhetoric of, but narrow metric for, public accountability; increased federalization and standardization of schools. And this is not even to mention the perception that schooling itself may become obsolete as learning, aided by rapidly developing technology, becomes more informal and ubiquitous.[4]

These are no mere reforms, but challenges to the founding premises of the common school: that all should pay to have community schools so that no child's future is predetermined by the social and economic capital of their parents; and that children from different backgrounds should learn together so that future citizens might escape the parochialism of class, clan, and creed. The rise of homeschooling and voucher schemes in recent years seems to herald an abandonment of the central and historic aims of public schooling. Given this, and the fact that so many attacks on the public schools seem self-serving and divisive, it is easy to feel that we must defend the schools as they are. However, we must be able to distinguish between public schools and government-run schools in the name of public life.

Toward that end, we might consider the distinction between formalist and functionalist (or substantive) definitions of public schooling. Gary Miron and Christopher Nelson offer a good formalist definition of the concept:

> A school (or other institution) is public if it is owned or controlled by citizens or their duly elected representatives. Assessing public-ness with this definition requires an investigation of who owns the means of educational production and to what extent schools and their activities are susceptible to oversight by elected bodies.[5]

While a formalist would judge the ''publicness'' of schools in terms of formal features such as funding and control, a functionalist would ask how well such a school performs its public functions or purposes. A public school might be formed as a school in the interests of ''the people'' but not function in ways that serve the shared purposes of the people of that district. For example, a school might be governed by the local citizenry but fail to promote the success of students from all walks of life. A substantively public school would promote

4. Nicholas C. Burbules, ''Ubiquitous Learning as a Social Foundations Issue,'' in *Handbook of Research on the Sociocultural Foundations of Education*, ed. Steven Tozer et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 527–533.

5. Gary Miron and Christopher Nelson, *What's Public About Charter Schools? Lessons Learned About Choice and Accountability* (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2002), 195.

not only private interests (for example, a student's positional advantage in the labor market), but public interests in the political, social, and economic realms of life.[6]

Are public schools providing good public outcomes? It is this functional sense of publicness that James Giarelli reports missing in his local public school, widely known in the region as a "good school." This school, like many suburban high schools, seemed organized around the aim of social efficiency and (white collar) vocationalism, preparing students to enter competitive universities to help them secure high-paying careers. Giarelli has noted that these "better" government-run schools are "considered effective because [they prepare] children for successful individual competition in the private economy." Thus, Giarelli concludes, "in substance and aims, [this] is *private* schooling."[7] Some may want to argue that government sponsorship is a necessary condition for a school's being public, but the sad state of our current civic life after a century and a half of the common school proves that it is not a sufficient condition. Moreover, if democracy is, as John Dewey famously argued, not merely a set of political devices but "a mode of associated living," then there is a further problem we need to explore.[8] Democracy requires not procedures for maintaining neutrality on value-laden issues, but citizens who can exercise the democratic virtues. The irony is that such democratic character education may well be more likely found, as Giarelli notes, in the nearby private Quaker school (for example) than in the local "public" one, since government schools shy away from teaching a way of life, even a democratic way of life, for fear of violating the establishment clause.[9]

More recently, Walter Feinberg has proposed that we trade our administrative, dichotomous public/private distinction for a substantive, qualitative scale.[10] Regardless of their governance structure, Feinberg suggests, all schools should be evaluated on the degree to which they meet various publicity criteria such as open

6. In his essay "Consuming the Public School" (in this issue), David Labaree discusses the paradox of a public educational system sold to consumers on the basis of its ability to promote everyone's positional advantage. In her essay "Staying in Control; Or, What Do We Really Want Public Education to Achieve?" (in this issue), Yuli Tamir explores the psychological forces and global pressures that spur and sap domestic support for public education.

7. James M. Giarelli, "Educating for Public Life," in *Critical Conversations in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995), 201.

8. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 87.

9. Giarelli discusses the Quaker school in "Educating for Public Life," 201–202; see also Kim Hays, *Practicing Virtues: Moral Traditions at Quaker and Military Boarding Schools* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). On the democratic virtues, see, for example, John Covaleskie, "Paley's Paradox: Educating for Democratic Life," in *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 330–337; and John Covaleskie, "Virtue, Liberty, and Discipline: Fostering the Democratic Character," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 37 (2006): 55–64.

10. Walter Feinberg, "The Dialectic of Parent Rights and Societal Obligations: Constraining Educational Choice," in *School Choice Policies and Outcomes: Empirical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Walter Feinberg and Chris Lubienski (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 234–236.

admissions (especially with respect to diversity), staffing based on professional accomplishment (not group membership), accountability to the community (and not just a coterie), commitment to student retention, and the promotion of student autonomy. Feinberg boldly contends that schools at the public end of this spectrum, whether government-run or not, should be subsidized while schools at the other end should be taxed.

This is an important moment for the common school: its very meanings, aims, and legitimacy are under vigorous debate. We have a historic opportunity to rearticulate the value of public education. In order to say why corporate schools are objectionable, why voucher systems are dangerous, why charter schools have a downside, why homeschooling should be regulated, and why, post-Google, it is still worthwhile to bring children together in a common space, we need to step back and ask both what we mean by "the public" and what it means for a school to be public. What demands does publicity place not only on access and on governance, but also on pedagogy and curriculum? How does schooling embody public space or cultivate public-mindedness?[11]

In this age of confusing upheaval around the ideals and structures of the common school, what is needed is a set of conceptual tools to help citizens, educators, and policymakers alike evaluate the degree to which any school, whether state-funded or not, may be judged public. Toward that end, we offer two contributions. In the next section, we consider five tensions inherent in the analysis of the concept of the public. In the final section, we describe two dimensions of schooling in which we work through the tensions of public life. Through governance of schools as well as through the enactments of curriculum and pedagogy, we actively make school public, and make the public. We conclude with a discussion of why this more active, verb-form of the term "public" is a key source of agency and hope in this educational era.

Problems and Their "Public"

There are many rival, richly detailed theories of the public. One way to get a handle on this complex literature is to see that each account of the public faces a series of key methodological questions:

- *Should the account be prescriptive or descriptive?* Should it seek to identify features of the public as an ideal type, or stick more closely to the actual conditions of contemporary social life?

- *Are we looking for* the *public, or for publics (plural)?* Is the public something that by definition is singular, at least within the context of a given nation-state, or are there multiple, overlapping bodies (or spaces) characterized by publicity?

---

11. Drawing on Hannah Arendt and Alasdair MacIntyre, Chris Higgins offers an account of schooling as public preparation, the classroom as public space, and the school as site of communal concern (see his essay "The Possibility of Public Education in an Instrumentalist Age," in this issue).

- *What is the relation between state and public(s)?* How are the state and public realms distinct or related? If the public sphere is pluralist, how do publics work for, with, or against the power of the state?

- *At what scale should we look for a public?* Is a public necessarily a large body of strangers, or do we find that certain smaller, more familiar groups might constitute "micro-publics"?

- *Is "public" a noun, adjective, or verb?* Is there such a thing as the, or even a, public, or does speaking in these terms reify a more fluid qualitative concept? Are publics the kind of thing that form and exist over time, tied to enduring institutions and overlapping membership? Or should we follow Dewey, for example, in seeing publics as fundamentally ad hoc, called into existence by an emerging situation?

There are three points to make about this list up front. First, we do not claim it to be exhaustive, only that every theory of the public is structured in important ways by how it deals with these five questions. Second, these are not freestanding methodological decisions: how we answer one question may dictate our answer to another. For example, it would be rather odd to think of the public as both singular in number and micro in scale. Third, as we shall show, many of these are best thought of as productive tensions rather than as questions with a right answer. Let us now look at each of these questions in greater depth, beginning with the question of realism and idealism in studies of public life.

PRESCRIPTIVE OR DESCRIPTIVE?

To see why this constitutes our first example of a productive tension, we need only point out why neither a purely prescriptive nor a purely descriptive approach to the public is tenable. Idealized accounts — in which, say, public life is portrayed as free of power dynamics or full of highly informed individuals — are rightly criticized not only for their detachment from reality, but for their role in maintaining certain problematic realities. According to thinkers such as Walter Lippmann, the public is a "phantom" whose unreality does not stop it from playing a powerful role in social life.[12] Manipulators of public opinion can get away with their manipulations in part because of the myth that there is a public sphere in which individuals express, contest, and revise judgments. In actual fact, the critics of idealist accounts argue, opinions rarely belong in any real sense to the individuals who express them, and conflict of opinion rarely leads to any revised or enlarged perspective. Powerful interests may sometimes buy votes, but more often the method is to buy voters: the media onslaught creates blocks of voters who feel they hold their views individually, and this allows the block issue (for example, opposition to the construction of Cordoba House, the proposed Muslim cultural center in downtown Manhattan dubbed the "Ground Zero Mosque" by the punditerati) to emerge as an aggregate public opinion.

---

12. Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*.

But the realpolitik critique goes too far if it fails to recognize the power of the public as a regulative ideal. The public may be elusive, but surely it is no simple fiction. True, much of our life may be lived out in what Hannah Arendt called ''the social,'' a space in which we are deprived simultaneously of privacy and public engagement.[13] Think of a crowded mall and you will get an image of what one commentator on Arendt's social sphere calls ''the blob.''[14] We often find ourselves in herds where we fail to individuate or to connect. But on occasion we enter another sort of space. We find ourselves in a group composed neither of intimates nor of disconnected strangers. Suddenly we feel that our words matter, and that we have been released from a narrow life of purely personal concerns, reconnecting with self and others around a matter of common concern. Perhaps Lippmann is right after all that the public has a spectral quality. However, it is precisely the fact that such a space can exist, and does on occasion open up, that haunts our everyday social experience of ''getting and spending.''[15] We need the concept of the *public* to name this real if rare experience and precisely to help us critique the conflation of public and mass. Thus, we must somehow learn to see the public with binocular vision, to view it both descriptively and prescriptively.

PUBLIC OR PUBLICS?

The tension between the singular public and plural publics is closely related to this first issue and is similarly productive. For it is part of the idealization of the public that one body could welcome all in as equals, that the recognition of our common concerns would unite us across divides into a single community — a community of loose ties to be sure, but a real *unum* to match our *pluribus*. The realist will point out that publics always exclude. Consider Jürgen Habermas's famous account of the bourgeois public sphere. Its *Offentlichkeit*, or openness, was real enough: in coffee houses and salons, individuals ventured judgments on matters of public concern, moving political action into the medium of talk. But, as Habermas's own sociological-historical analysis suggests, this sphere was predicated on social class hierarchies. The openness within the sphere went hand-in-hand with a certain degree of exclusiveness. The bourgeois public sphere was not fully open to women, the working class, and ethnic minorities.[16]

This recognition has led critics of Habermas's view to talk of plural public spheres and specifically of counterpublics created not only at a distance from state

---

13. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 22–78.

14. Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

15. This is a phrase from the famous Wordsworth poem: ''The world is too much with us; late and soon, Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.'' See William Wordsworth, ''The World Is Too Much with Us,'' in *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 182.

16. For Habermas's original account of the public sphere, see *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.* For a later précis, see Jürgen Habermas, ''The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,'' *New German Critique* 3 (1974): 102–107. For an excellent collection of sympathetic-critical responses, see Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

power, as with the public sphere of civil society, but at a distance from the social norms of civil society.[17] These counterpublic associations push larger publics toward more inclusiveness when they work on both interpublic and intrapublic goals.[18] Consider the example of a counterpublic forming around the systematic exclusion of gay and lesbian people from legal and civil rights. Such a group is not a public unless it is working both internally (to develop a shared language, purpose, and strength) as well as externally (to engage with and reform the larger public sphere toward a more inclusive, comprehensive public sphere). Without such interpublic engagement, however, such groups would be merely interest groups.[19] If a group has come together solely in order to strategize how best to leverage its interests in the political process, this is not a public. The public is a space in which new senses of ''we'' could be formed across divisions and where judgments about the common good could be slowly constructed out of diverse perspectives without this being preempted by an aggregation of individual interests. Thus, in public life there are forces both centrifugal (as counterpublics stand apart from a presumed unity to question its assumptions) and centripetal (as multiple publics work across differences to forge concrete fusions of horizons).

THE STATE AND ITS PUBLIC(S)

Even if we opt for a singular notion of the public, the public and the state are distinct entities. Dewey reminded us that ''the public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.''[20] Publics and state-sponsored governmental institutions (for example, schools, courts, legislatures, parks, prisons, and the like) are not synonymous, but interdependent: ''A public articulated and operating through representative officers is the state; there is no state without a government, but also there is none without the public.''[21] Leonard Waks characterizes Dewey's understanding of the relation of the state and its publics as follows: ''The state can best be understood as a very loosely structured umbrella organization that equips society and its publics with all sorts of official representatives, organizations, and resources to care for their interests in obviating the negative consequences of social behaviors.''[22] Because

17. See, for example, Nancy Fraser, ''Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,'' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Calhoun; and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 109–142.

18. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the ''Postsocialist'' Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 82.

19. Compare Dewey's criteria for democratic association: ''How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared'' within social groups, and ''how full and free is the interplay'' across social groups? See Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. For a nice explication of the logic of these criteria, see Leonard J. Waks, ''Dewey's Theory of the Democratic Public and the Public Character of Charter Schools,'' *Educational Theory* 60, no. 6 (2010): 676–677.

20. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 15–16.

21. Ibid., 67.

22. Waks, ''Dewey's Theory of the Democratic Public,'' 671.

some publics gain enough population and power to ensure that their interests are systematically cared for by the state, public interests can become, over time, melded into state interests.

This symbiotic relation between public and state means that officials must answer to the people, but here is where the previous issue of singular and plural publics comes into play. For if the public sphere writ large is itself unavoidably exclusionary, we need not only a public check on officialdom but a counterpublic check on the regnant norms in civil society that make us unable to see or incline us to rationalize social exclusions. Thus, the public is simultaneously a hegemonic and counterhegemonic concept.

Public associations have diverse forms, interests, and ways of communicating; they have access to highly disparate pools of resources and sources of influence. What opens the doors to the unquestioned hegemony of a public association over the state are the corruptions and failures that unavoidably exist within the deliberative, communicative processes and functions of public and state institutions. Publics are political associations of persons; their ability to serve the interests of the many or of the powerful few largely ride upon the qualities of communication, deliberation, and reflexivity within the public association itself. With enough population or membership, any public can grow larger and thus more influential in the ways its institutions and organs attempt to assert its (evolving) aims. Without proper self-reflexive and deliberative processes, without constitutional boundaries and principled leadership, publics can and do become hegemonic. That is, a public association and its state apparatus can become part of the dominant and ''commonsense'' ordering of political life and, in so doing, deflect legitimate critique or inquiry. Such public associations ignore the ways in which their aims and goals have become misguided or perhaps harmful to some members of the society. These publics have become hardened and static through their power and institutionalization. Waks, following Dewey, describes this process as follows:

> The state system, in education and other areas of public concern, thus devolves into habitual behavior and bureaucracy. It requires pressures from publics, organized and active in civil society, to transform existing situations. These publics, however, need to achieve sufficient recognition if they are to accrue the power necessary to influence public action. For this to occur the publics have to, first, identify themselves in the minds of their members and the general public, and, second, enter into mutually reinforcing alliances to forge powerful social movements.[23]

Counterpublics emerge when those institutionalized and static hegemonic publics no longer serve the needs or interests of parts of the population.[24] But counterpublic associations are not, again, inherently virtuous or saintly, and themselves may be operating in ways that exclude, oppress, or diminish certain

---

23. Ibid., 674. Waks cites the following sources in support of this analysis: Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (1970) (London: Marion Boyars, 2000); and Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, 129 and 77.

24. Community organizing, as discussed by Aaron Schutz in ''Power and Trust in the Public Realm: John Dewey, Saul Alinsky, and the Limits of Progressive Democratic Education'' (in this issue), is one of the ways that counterpublics can productively form to assert the educational interests of those excluded populations or groups.

groups of citizens. Furthermore, it is important to remember that these are politically organic processes of will formation over time. What might be today's counterpublic association could be tomorrow's hegemonic public power. Public actors and associations require modes of reflexivity and communication in order to distinguish today's legitimate public interests from more narrow and elitist political agendas.

At What Scale the Public?

The public is a body of strangers and associated people who share a political fate and interdependence. ''The public'' is most conceptually familiar to us as a nation-state concept; the ''Great Community'' of Deweyan analysis. It is idealized as a political-social entity governed according to constitutional norms and the laws developed around these norms. That is the terrain of the ideal, but at the descriptive level the Public strikes many of us as sensationalist, dysfunctional, and not at all a vehicle for solving shared problems and concerns. Pulls toward privacy, domestic pleasures and concerns, and consumption — as well as the diminishment of the power of public institutions at state and local levels in neoliberal economic contests — deplete the energies and powers of more localized and regionalized publics.

Yet ultimately, the tension between the large-scale publics and the localized, smaller public groups is productive and informative. Publics form through interpersonal associations that arise when people share their concerns and problems that transcend private or domestic boundaries. These concerns become public problems and agendas through those interpersonal encounters, and connect to larger, more widespread, and less localized public associations through their shared concerns and strategies. That the larger public associated with the nation-state may seem more ''real,'' and much more poisonous, than these local associations is one of the reasons commentators warning of the demise of public life get so much traction today.

Public as Noun, Adjective, or Verb?

This tension is helpful in that it enables us to pay closer attention to how, when, and why the term ''public'' is evoked in our speech and in our political lives. While we are not interested here in some essential or permanently stable meaning of the term, the abundance and dizzying array of rhetoric employing the ''public'' signifier testifies to its complex and diffuse use in the English language.

Let's look at two common uses of the term as a noun. ''The public pays taxes to support common schools.'' In this usage, the public is a noun and tends to be equated with all adult members of a society in good legal standing. This is a unifying kind of idealist-nationalist public, signifying symbolic unity and shared common interests, with little correspondence to the reality of a highly diverse and unequal nation-state. It is also the source of the public as adjective; those schools primarily funded by taxpayer dollars are thus described as public schools.

''The public is angry about paying school taxes, and is organizing to influence school-funding formulas.'' Here is another usage of public as a noun, as a

personified entity capable of emotional reactions to policies, actions, or laws. Its rhetorical excesses are clear, as there is absolutely no law or policy about which the Public is unified in its opinion. Yet what is meant by a statement such as this one is, perhaps, that some segment of the total Public has formed a counterpublic against the larger public whose political will has created the habits as well as the laws that compel taxation for universal schooling.

Hardly ever do we speak of public as a term of action, as a verb connoting a special type of activity. This linguistic gap points to a certain kind of cultural gap, one particularly felt within the United States political system. We often point to the public or publics as emerging fully formed on the political scene, yet public formation is a wide arc of activities and growth over time. Publics are not so much given as they are achieved through what Harry Boyte calls public work — the everyday problem-solving efforts of citizens (both non-elected and elected).[25] The work of forming and achieving publics is more art than science, and requires an array of deliberative and participatory institutions to supplement the mostly representative forms of government that run Western democratic systems. Public as verb thus needs a wider understanding and corresponding set of institutions to enable a richer public life.

What Makes a School Public?

We now have some sense of the complexity involved in calling anything public. What, then, specifically does it mean to call a school public? As noted earlier, we have tended to answer this question in formalist rather than functionalist ways. What makes a school public: operating according to the laws and policies designated to apply to "public schools." While such nominalist, circular definitions leave us uncertain about what public schooling means in substance, they have served a political purpose, heading off those who would attack the monopoly of government-run schools over support from tax revenues. However, recent events suggest that this traditional, formalist framework has now collapsed: definition-defying amalgams of private philanthropists, foundations, nonprofits, parent groups, for-profit businesses, teachers' unions, and government institutions now are competing and sometimes collaborating in the creation of a brave new world of schooling.[26] For better and for worse, the simple equation of public schools and government-run schools has been broken. For worse, because this frees the hands of those who would reshape the schools according to thinly veiled

---

25. Harry Boyte and Nan Skelton, *Reinventing Citizenship: The Power of Public Work* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

26. For analyses of new developments along these lines, see Katrina E. Bulkley, Jeffrey R. Henig, Henry L. Levin, eds., *Between Public and Private: Politics, Governance, and the New Portfolio Models for Urban School Reform* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010); Phillip Kovaks, *The Gates Foundation and the Future of U.S. "Public" Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2011); and Alfie Kohn and Patrick Shannon, eds., *Education, Inc.: Turning Learning into a Business* (Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 2002). As Deron Boyles shows in his essay "The Privatized Public: Antagonism for a Radical Democratic Politics in Schools?" (in this issue), however, corporations need not run schools in order to exert an insidious influence within them: commercialization may also undermine the public function of government-run schools.

motives of profit and prejudice. For better, because it forces us to articulate anew the civic substance of schooling. In the name of public life, we argue, we must consider when, where, and how a government-run school (if indeed that remains a necessary condition) achieves a public mission.

In the space remaining, we would like to consider, in a preliminary way, what it might mean for a school to achieve not only nominal but substantive publicity in two areas: governance and curriculum/pedagogy. In each of these areas, we suggest, schools offer insights into how we can live productively within the tensions that we have just considered.

GOVERNANCE

Schools at their best teach us how to construct meaning within the prescriptive and descriptive tensions of public life. On the one side is the historic normative ideal of public life, where a ''we'' is built from shared historical, cultural, national, linguistic, and religious identities, a ''we'' of magical consensus and highly informed citizens. On the realist side, public life seems mired with politicians, public figures, and influence-wielders whose public interests seem to be only thinly veiled private agendas, where a ''we'' is only constituted by the proper combination of campaign contributions and lobbying groups who easily trump mostly uninformed or deluded citizens. Though each of these positions is tempting, both must be rejected in their extreme forms.

The twentieth-century common school was fueled by the powerful fiction that the ''we'' formations of public life are possible through shared identities of origin, language, religion, and nation. This ''we'' was constituted from a selectively wrought, sometimes fictive narrative that masked exclusions, oppression, and hard-won battles for human recognition and civil rights. What is left when much of this fiction falls away is a pragmatic idea of citizens as interdependent for a sustained quality of social life. This statement has no ontological baggage of how we as individuals are spiritually or essentially constituted; it does assert, however, that our fates are intertwined as people who share common resources, political territory, places, and spaces. For the foreseeable future, we will share air, water, food sources, land, roadways, power grids, safety/emergency systems, and a host of other natural, cultural, economic, and social systems on which our lives and livelihoods depend. As Melissa Williams states,

> A community of shared fate is *not* an ethical community as such. Its members are not bound to each other by shared values or moral commitments, but by relations of interdependence, which may or may not be positively valued by its members. Our futures are bound to each other, whether we like it or not.[27]

Williams describes the pragmatic nature of our basic connection to other citizens across boundaries of sect and origin. This connection presents no magical ''we,''

---

27. Melissa S. Williams, ''Citizenship as Identity, Citizenship as Shared Fate, and the Functions of Multicultural Education,'' in *Citizenship and Education in Liberal-Democratic Societies: Teaching for Cosmopolitan Values and Collective Identities,* ed. Kevin McDonough and Walter Feinberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 229.

but it calls to attention the practical route by which the tenuous and fragile political identifications of ''we'' can be forged.

While our interdependence does not constitute an ethical community as such, it can serve as an important philosophical starting point for schools, including their governance, at this critical time. We are in a time of tremendous debate about who should control government-supported schools. Beyond those who believe exclusively in the power of markets and the privatization of schools, there are many across the political spectrum who wish to weaken or eradicate local control altogether. There has already been a general trend of increasing centralization of control of public schooling, as the federal and state governments have asserted more authority over schools in recent decades, and mayoral takeover of urban school districts has become much more commonplace. The institution of the local school board has come under increasing attack. ''First, Kill All the School Boards,'' a 2008 *Atlantic* article written not by a Republican but by a Democrat, argued that the federal government ought to replace local school boards as the primary authority over schooling.[28] There are strong centralization currents flowing in educational discourse, and among centralization advocates, there is a powerful impulse to assert an authoritative ''We'' of schooling in the name of national achievement in the face of global competitive challenges.

There are other ways to envision how a more inclusive ''We'' might be formed, ways that balance concerns for national productivity and standards of learning with local concerns and voices. Centralization of public control tends to ignore the productive tensions between the singular, unitary public sphere and the multiple publics and counterpublics that more or less naturally arise in political life in a diverse society. The tension between the singular public and multiple publics is one where the nation-state and the constitutional principles shaping law and government pull against the local problems and the microlevel political associations they spawn. As part of the singular public, we are part of a system of representative democracy. As such, we elect representatives and executive officials to the national, state, and local levels of government. Much, perhaps too much, of the substance of schooling today is set by those representatives, the laws they pass, and the educational officials appointed by executives. Even at the local level, we elect school board representatives who are supposed to represent the collective interests of a school district and make decisions for the whole.

Yet multiple publics abound in a healthy democratic system; they do so because we experience collective problems as public problems, as citizens. When a district needs new school buildings or faces problems of school violence, these issues are experienced and felt by local citizens as well as students and teachers. Political associations form in response, and these can grow into publics whose political energies can be harnessed to better enhance educational capacity in schools.

---

28. Matt Miller, ''First, Kill All the School Boards,'' *Atlantic Monthly* 301, no. 1 (January/February 2008); http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/01/first-kill-all-the-school-boards/6579/.

Public schooling is enacted within this tension: between the singular public of the nation-state and the government representatives that are charged with carrying out the will of the Public, and the multiple, more localized publics of everyday problems and issues. Many national reformers wish to dissolve this tension by centralizing control of schooling and giving way to the tempting notion of a singular, unified public. This simply ignores the fact that within the public of the nation-state are limitless public associations formed partly of parents whose local voices and creative energies are vital to the uniquely local work of the education of children. Public school governance can and does work well when it is constructed by and for the public through attention both to the laws and policies of official representative bodies, as well as to the publics born of school needs, issues, and conflicts.[29] Enacting school governance within the context of this tension requires a unique balancing act for leaders. The need for this kind of constructed governance will hold true as long as government-supported public schools remain locally controlled in some significant sense.

CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY

Public considerations around curriculum and pedagogy are dominated by the idea, considered earlier, of the public as a negative space. Our system is predicated on the notion that in a public school what gets taught, and how it is taught, must neither violate the establishment clause nor trespass upon parents' rights to conduct their children's ethico-religious upbringing. For example, it has recently been argued by some Christian groups that teaching about contraception and safe sex in health class compromises parents' ability to raise their children to believe that sex outside of marriage is immoral and that one must therefore be abstinent until marriage. And one can easily think of less controversial issues. We would not want a public school to teach that one religion holds the truth while other groups worship false idols. And while we hope the public schools will ameliorate sectarianism and encourage a certain degree of cosmopolitanism, it would not be acceptable for the schools to promote an energetic secularism, a general skepticism toward religion itself. Sometimes the line is drawn so that the material itself is barred from inclusion in the curriculum. In other contexts, the issue is how something is taught. For example, it might be acceptable to some school boards to have debates over sensitive social issues — extreme rendition, gay marriage, immigration policy — taught in social studies class, provided that a range of representative views are given fair consideration and the teacher is careful not to endorse any of the views. In a public school, it is thought, curriculum must include only knowledge and skills that have an equal place in any worldview, and pedagogy must never cross over into indoctrination into a particular way of life.[30]

---

29. Kathleen Knight Abowitz defends this assertion in her essay ''Achieving Public Schools'' (in this issue).

30. The school battles over multiculturalism, as discussed in Walter Parker's essay ''Constructing Public Schooling Today: Derision, Multiculturalism, Nationalism'' (in this issue), are illustrative examples.

On this reading the public is a zone of overlap between private spheres (domestic, religious, political). It is, as it were, the general space we enter when we all exit our particular enclaves. Notice how this metaphor decides two of the methodological questions considered previously. Here the public is viewed prescriptively (since it is assumed that such a space exists, that groups can and will want to enter it from their enclaves, that it will have its own ethos rather than one smuggled in from one of the more powerful sects — for example, WASPs — and so on). In this metaphor, the public is also large, unitary, and nominalized (the public as a place we can visit anytime we like). And this public is aligned with the interests of the state, at least with its specific interest of avoiding sectarian conflict.

Thus, in turning to some suggestions regarding what a substantive public curriculum and pedagogy might look like, we have two guiding principles. First, we want to move beyond the negative space model: how might a classroom become a positive embodiment of public life rather than merely a zone free of sectarian influence? Second, we want to find a public curriculum and pedagogy that inhabits rather than prematurely resolves our five tensions. In particular, we want to launch off of the final tension. What if we think of the public not as a noun, and as something given, but as a verb? What might it mean to think of the classroom not as a room within an institution that is already public, but as a space in which teachers and learners make public?

It is commonly assumed that teachers represent the public world to students, who until this point have existed in parochial pockets. Let us consider a rival conception.[31] Teachers and students alike find the stuff of the common world always already losing its power to appear as a matter of common concern. Things lose their thinginess through long familiarity and instrumental use. Dynamic insights become inert facts. Meanings degenerate into slogans. Matters calling for judgment become fodder for opinion.

If we think of the public as a common world, as a space where robust matters of concern call people together from different social locations, emphasizing at once their interdependence and their differing vantage points, then the public is not something given, something introduced by teachers to students. Rather, curriculum is a search for these matters of common concern behind the veils of mute facts and chattering opinion. And pedagogy becomes the attempt to call together a public hearing on these matters of common concern, an attempt to build a capacity for judgment. This is certainly not easy to do. Historical episodes congeal into dusty trophies or evaporate into myths. Current events hypostatize into a Fox News–style "balanced debate." But when it works, teachers and students can find

---

31. In what follows, we are drawing on Hannah Arendt and Bruno Latour. See Arendt, *Human Condition*; Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004); and Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005). Particularly helpful is Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons's Arendtian conception of a public school (see Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, "Schools as Architecture for Newcomers and Strangers: The Perfect School as Public School?" *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 [2010]: 533–555).

that they have stumbled into the common world, which still exists, or now exists, in their classroom.

In realms of governance, curriculum, and pedagogy, schools are public not when they achieve a mystical unity, wholeness, or sense of democratic virtuous perfection. They are not public merely when they are accepting tax dollars and obeying state laws of governance. They are public, significantly if not completely, when they are enacting common worlds. Public schools, whatever their future forms and substance, are unique spaces where educational possibility and relation afford us the opportunity to create such common worlds. Across difference we bring children together to share resources and aspirations in the name of our common fates and converging interests. We enact the tensions of public life, face its impossibilities, and create possible openings for public work and public learning now and in the future. The civic substance of schooling is built when "public" becomes more than a noun — more than a plural noun, even — but a verb constituting the active work of inhabiting it and (re)building it in each era.