
THE PUBLICLY PRIVATE:
SCHOOLS AS SITES OF CONFRONTING THE CLASH BETWEEN
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

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The relation of the private life to the public is perplexing when thinking about the role of the public and private in public schooling, particularly as students learn to distinguish and navigate the private and public space of school. Learning to attend to the nuances between private and public and encountering documents that indicate such distinctions exist, such as student conduct codes, sets teachers up for a particular set of expectations when engaging in classroom discourse or other deliberative actions. Assuming that private individually held views and public views shared by a whole group are well-defined and separate provides for confrontations between the private and public lives of students in public school settings.

The notion of the private remaining at home while students engage in a public space is rooted in the assumption that we can effectively label components of our identity as being implicitly private or public. Yet, when we look at the complexity of identity as an individual and a public citizen, the ability to classify aspects of the self as private or public is problematized. It is imperative to acknowledge that this is not the same as collapsing the boundaries between the personal and the political but acknowledging the inherent distinctions.

Macedo,¹ Knight Abowitz,² and Stitzlein help situate the formation of public and private in regard to student identity within the K-12 classroom.³ While public schooling relies upon the perception of an existing dichotomy of private and public within student identity, students must come to grips with what the key differences are and what behaviors are acceptable at home, at school, or both. As students navigate the fuzziness between private and public, teachers play a central role in shaping students' perceptions of publicness and privateness through classroom interactions. I discuss the ways the divisibility of students and teachers' identities into individual (private) or citizen (public) components presents us with specific challenges within the K-12 public school and results in the blurring of the "boundaries" between public and private.

¹ Stephen Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust: Civic Education in a Multicultural Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

² Kathleen Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).

³ Sarah M. Stitzlein, *American Public Education and the Responsibility of Its Citizens: Supporting Democracy in the Age of Accountability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

Learning what constitutes the “privateness” or “publicness” of something is both an outcome and a process of learning the very conception of *what* is the private and *what* is the public.³ This Deweyan insight presents specific problems to schools and teachers. I explore factors that impact teachers’ mediation of the private and public within the classroom: ideological separation, confrontational staging, and “enactedness.” Ideological separation presents the notion of being able to distinguish publicness and privateness based on the perceived capacity to ideologically separate private and public without overlap. Confrontational staging suggests that by ascribing to ideological separation, the classroom forces teachers to unexpectedly confront the clash of the publicness and privateness of students’ lives within the classroom at any moment. Lastly, leveled implications or “enactedness” addresses the conflict between separating out the private and public on paper versus when distinguishing between the two is enacted in a particular classroom context in the moment.

EXEMPLARS

In order to situate and contextualize my argument, I provide three arbitrary, seemingly small, everyday situations that could occur in a public school. First, the student who, at home, is permitted to use derogatory references. Second, the young student who, upon seeing a classmate’s homemade ethnic lunch, exclaims, “Ewww! Gross!” Lastly, the student who is agnostic or atheist and notices religious references inside the public school.

Each of these students could potentially receive conflicting, affirming, or fuzzy messaging between the home and school settings. How do these students learn to distinguish between the privateness and the publicness of their encounters? Handbooks, codes of conduct, and teacher preparation do not address *all* the ways the fuzziness between public and private can manifest within the school. Based on their familial lives, students enter into the public school with various conceptions of what *is* actually private and public, creating challenges for teachers in distinguishing between what parents permit students to do at home, privately and yet publicly, and the expectations for what is acceptable in the public space of the classroom. The day-to-day interactions with teachers – the slow, complex, fragile process – where the clashes of public and private present themselves provides the potential for the formative notions of publicness to become educative.

Ideological Separation

Ideological separation refers to the notion that, in theory, we perceive that the privateness and publicness of an identity and/or situation is clearly distinguishable. Yet, students entering into a classroom do not always distinguish between private and public, but rather learn these “boundaries” during years of schooling. The idea that the publicness and privateness of one’s identity can be

³ Natasha Levinson, “Great Ideas in Education,” Lecture, Kent State University, Kent, OH, Fall 2019.

classified is particularly problematic. Rules and guidelines are written as if K-12 students come into schools as public citizens, rather than private individuals. The assumption is that students are already fully versed in the nuances of categorizing what is private and what is public but fails to acknowledge that what families convey to students as private and public varies. For example, the student using derogatory terminology in school receives the message from the school that the terminology is not to be used in school but is allowed to freely utilize it at home. This can also vary based on the situatedness of the school. If located in a community where the terminology is accepted, it may be inherently public in its manifestation, yet those located in other communities could identify the language as being against publicness and, therefore, inherently private.

Macedo,⁴ Knight Abowitz,⁵ and Stitzlein suggest that,⁷ as citizens, we have achieved and share some level of understanding of what is private and what is public. This is true to some degree, but how did we learn to make such distinctions? While Macedo and Knight Abowitz address the division of the private and public, both accounts of such divisions are somewhat insufficient in regard to classroom life. Unaccounted for is the on-the-ground experience of teachers navigating what is deemed to be public and private *within* the myriad unpredictable moments arising daily.

Macedo takes up the notion of the private versus the public under the context of court cases, such as *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* and *Meyer v. Nebraska*.⁸ While these examples depict the struggle of separating out private and public lives in relation to schooling, they offer little to teachers in the handling of smaller scale clashes of private-public identity within the moment. Macedo offers up the use of the public good as a central tenet to the remediation of the clash.⁶ Thus, when cases come to a decision of the needs of the private and/or the public over the other, the way in which the cases are understood, as for the individual or the good of the public, did more for the cases' outcomes than the actual criteria for deciding what is private and what is public.

To gauge the impact of decisions, Macedo offers the idea of "gravitational force" and calls for contextualization of the cases.¹⁰ The influence, or "gravitational force," of cases' decisions are contextualized against all the fuzziness assigned to the specific details of the situation and dependent upon how

⁴ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*.

⁵ Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools*.

⁷ Stitzlein, *American Public Education*.

⁸ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 94 uses this example in which the court sided with the Society of Sisters, going against a law that required parents to send their children to public schools and allowing them to send their child to private schools; Macedo, 94, uses this example in which the court sided with Meyer, going against a state law requiring children to be educated in English, allowing for the possibility of education in a language other than English within public schooling.

⁹ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 88-109.

¹⁰ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 95.

the cases are interpreted.⁷ Macedo warns that not contextualizing the cases risks displacing the arguments and positioning the cases as exemplars of the rights of the private. For example, using the outcomes of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* and *Meyer v. Nebraska* to depict the valuing of parental choice or private desires for education/curriculum as above the valuing of the public is misleading. Macedo indicates that the specifics of the cases contextualize the outcomes in a much different light.⁸ Despite Macedo's warnings, I argue that the phenomenon of legal exemplars is already well established in the playing field of public schooling.

Pamphlets, handouts, and other documents passed to parents, teachers, and community members do not often contextualize the results of court cases, research studies, etc. in a way that acknowledges the intricacies. Instead, snippets of information are passed along with the appropriate citations, "proving" legitimacy and providing generalizability. Therefore, "legitimized" claims are often not investigated by the receiver, which is concerning but outside the scope of this project. In any case, reducing an entire argument down to one specific outcome and leaving out the intricacies of the situation lends itself well to both the misrepresentation of the outcome and, potentially, its "gravitational force" and generalizability.

Knight Abowitz offers up the idea of the private and the public being "porous" and attempts to make the distinction between the two appear as more of a grey area of overlap than polar opposites.¹⁴ Knight Abowitz's argument centers around the public work of adults in regard to public schooling, rather than on teaching students the distinction of what is private and public. Therefore, the assumption is made that adults engaging in public work for public schools possess the understanding that the public value can be addressed in taking up private values within the realm of public work. How does one come to this understanding that something is private in nature, but that it can be taken up for the sake of the public? How does a citizen make such a distinction in the "privateness" or "publicness" of something?

Recall the student exclaiming "ewww!" when seeing a peer's ethnic lunch. The student code of conduct most likely does not contain a rule to refrain from hurtful language upon seeing unfamiliar foods. More likely, is that a rule exists not to harm another student with language, physicality, etc. On paper, the rule conveys that one should do no harm and that there is recognizable language that hurts, but what happens when the student doesn't grasp that "ewww" is hurtful language? This example gets at the idea of ideological separation. The student may not have exposure to multiple cultures, ethnic foods, nor understand their integral role in one's identity. Yet, the rightful expectation exists for the young student *not* to harm another student, but, in this instance, do they recognize

¹² Macedo, 95.

¹³ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 94-103

¹⁴ Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools*, 58.

their privately held belief – that the food looks gross – *is* harmful to the other student, and potentially, to their identity?

Ideological separation is not solved by Macedo nor Knight Abowitz’s suggestions, as the inherent inclusion of the private in the public by students still learning the very context of what is private and public is not addressed. School policies and rules are written with fundamental separation of the private from the public, but even as the authors take up the “separate” notions of the private and public, they do not go as far as establishing criteria for such endeavors. Instead, they suggest overlap and the valuing of the public over the private in relation to public schooling. While I agree with the valuing of publicness over privateness, we forget that students are not coming into schools with clear conceptions of the private and the public. They come into schools with conceptions based on familial distinctions of private and public. Yet, we expect them to have the ability to parse out such conceptions and to place greater value on publicness, over privateness, without teaching them how to do so.

In Macedo’s, Knight Abowitz’s, and Stitzlein’s suggestions for civic education, there is no evidence of explicit engagement with the unpredictable nature of what students bring into the classroom. Thus, the entanglement of the private in the public space is inevitable as students actively engage with the process of learning to identify the “boundaries” of private and public. The students are not coming to school with, and cannot come to school with, clear consensus on what is public because they enter school from vastly distinctive private lives. Students must come into contact with the publicness of schooling in order to lay the foundation for understanding the agreed upon ideology on which citizens distinguish the publicness and privateness of something.

Confrontational Staging

Confrontational staging suggests that placing students in a setting to come into contact with the public sets the teacher and school up for direct confrontation between students’ notions of private and public, as well as between the students’ and school personnel’s conceptions of private and public. Writing rules that assume the ability to separate out what is private and public forces school personnel to confront the tension of the private and the public within the school. Separating the private from the public proves to be more difficult in the ways it plays out in schools as students rely on these confrontations to construct publicly, no longer privately, held understandings of what constitutes the private and public.

The arguments presented by Macedo, Knight Abowitz, and Stitzlein do not account for the time and attention required in order to learn how to distinguish the private from the public, nor do they attend to the publicly constructed nature of what *is* public and private. By this, I refer to the fact that as students enter schools, they come with idiosyncratic notions of what is private and public based on their own *private* lives. For example, the construct of a dress code possesses particular private and public aspects that are different across

religious doctrines (i.e., Islam, Catholicism, etc.), gender identity (i.e., transgender), and public/community/familial values (i.e., tribal communities, western versus eastern cultures, etc.).

Macedo, Knight Abowitz, and Stitzlein lay out the components of civic education very carefully, attending to the multiple needs of democracy. Yet, they fail to address the publicness of the process of developing publicly constructed notions of what comprises public and private. Educating for publicness at home is still inherently a privately formed notion of publicness. If we are educating for the public good, meaning that we do not attend solely to our individual or private needs, there is a level of publicness that must be engaged with in a public setting in order to transform our thinking of our own way of life as *the* public way of life to our way of life as *a* way of *private* life. This transformation of one's thinking is embedded in the notion of Macedo's bid for developing tolerance.

One of the foundational components of developing tolerance is coming into contact with the public, specifically with people whose values or ways of being differ from your own.⁹ The process creates a transformational component in so far as the experience is educational.¹⁰ Students come away from the experience having understood something differently. In the previous example of the young student exclaiming “ewww!,” the transformation could entail the publicness being broadened beyond their own privately constructed beliefs/viewpoint of the public. A teacher could discuss types of ethnic foods found in the U.S. and where/how/why the foods originated, etc., in order to expand the young student's and the class' conception of “food” beyond that which they see at home and/or in their own community.

Knight Abowitz and Stitzlein also advocate for civic education to be at the forefront of the public school's goals for citizenship. However, Knight Abowitz and, in some ways, Stitzlein take up the notion of the public versus the private in leveraging your private interests for the public good, specifically, the public good of the public school. In doing so, there is a risk in the assumption that a citizen or a student undergoing the process of civic education is situated in such a position to first distinguish the public from the private and, second, to possess the perspective of expanding their private values and desires into a valuable good for the benefit of the public. The assumption is that they have undergone transformation in some way that has enacted their sense of the publicness of the public writ large. This assumption and the assumption that students possess foundational understandings of public and private creates the scenario for conflicting notions of private and public to arise when students enter schools. Teaching for notions of publicness in civic education is not inherently troublesome but is difficult when we don't account for students' need to publicly develop notions of the public versus privately constructing them within the home.

⁹ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 134-138, 233-253.

¹⁰ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 275-279.

Think of the student who is agnostic or atheist noticing a religious artifact in a public school, such as a plaque of the Ten Commandments gifted by a graduating class.¹¹ Where is the distinction between public and private? Does the school community view religion as public? What if the student views spirituality as a privately held belief?

Constructing an environment for public/private confrontation increases the school's responsibility. This means that teachers, responsible for handling such confrontations, are assumed to be effective and accurate at parsing out private versus public, without having been educated to do so. In essence, teachers assist in constructing students' perceptions of public and private, potentially failing to identify that their perspectives of the private are implicated in their view of the public. Yet, as a public, we believe we have the ability to successfully separate out that very thing without accounting for the large areas of overlap or fuzziness in between. This idea aligns with Macedo, Knight Abowitz, and Stitzlein, who all highlight the idea of classifying what we believe to be public and private being attainable given the allowance for the grey area, what I refer to as fuzziness, to exist.

This fuzziness places greater responsibility onto teachers in regard to deciding what is and isn't public and private. It also increases the chance that the teacher will be held accountable for such decisions in light of the fact that a complete list of what is public and what is private is not provided to the teacher, nor could be provided due to fuzziness of the "boundaries" between the public and private. Although outside the parameters of this paper, asking the teacher to demarcate the "boundaries" of the public and private potentially decreases the likelihood that the teacher will be a proponent for holding such conversations with students in which the teacher is in a vulnerable position. This is problematic in light of philosophers of education, such as Biesta,¹² who hold that the teacher should be vulnerable within the classroom.

Leveled Implications/"Enactedness"

Confronting the public and private in schools highlights the leveled implications of rules for those involved in various ways in schools. For example, a student and parent engage with schooling in a more day-to-day on the ground level than a taxpayer or state official. This aligns with Stitzlein, who discusses the levels of engagement of the public with the school.¹³ Teachers and students engage with schooling in a much more face-to-face way than even administrators, the school board, and the community. While this may sound like

¹⁸ Nancy Molnar, "Freedom from Religion Foundation objects to Ten Commandments at Welty Middle School," *The Times Reporter*, April 2019, <https://www.timesreporter.com/news/20190423/freedom-from-religion-foundation-objects-to-ten-commandments-at-welty-middle-school>.

¹⁹ Gert J. J. Biesta, *The Rediscovery of Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁰ Stitzlein, *American Public Education*, 93-107.

the typical situation, it is concerning when we address the notion of policy versus its implementation.

Bear in mind that for Macedo, court cases utilized as exemplars are not the singular voice upon which issues, where the notion of the individual and the public good are at hand, are to be decided. This is important when thinking of school rules, which are often viewed as the singular voice in deciding what breaks and what aligns with the rules themselves.

On paper, rules mostly possess adequate language for parsing out constructs as black or white. It either is or it isn't X. Definitions are provided, parameters to be met listed, and language is explicitly utilized to convey such decisions. Yet, in practice, the implications of the rules are much different and lead to fuzzy areas where the majority of situations, in which rules are broken, fall. So, for the student exclaiming "Ewww!," do we punish according to school rules for harming? Or do we engage with the fuzziness?

Conceptually, this sounds like the area of overlap for the public and the private put forth by Knight Abowitz. Additionally, it appears similar to Macedo's use of the court cases as exemplars attesting to the intricacies of the court cases and advises against broad application of the cases. As stated, students enter schools with inadequate private/public distinctions; the language used in rules does not effectively address the intricacies of students' conceptions of public and private. Writing rules as bounded known entities without adequate fuzziness suggests that distinctions between the private and public are easily made and the possibility of transformational experiences, coming in contact with ideas that differ from students' own,¹⁴ is repressed. Without the fuzziness and the space to explore such fuzziness, we lose the very space in which teachers and students need to linger.

Instead, schools serve to shape publicly constructed notions of what is private and public during students' schooling. In other words, deciphering what is publicly private and publicly public is disciplined within schooling. Students will naturally and repeatedly bring the private into the school until they learn otherwise or are transformed.¹⁵ That is, they will do so until they learn to identify the publicly constructed "boundaries" of what is public and what is private. This process takes time, discipline, and repeated occurrences of the private being brought into the public in order for students to attend to the differences and begin to recognize the "boundaries." Allowing the fuzziness, where the public and the private come into contact and providing the time and space for students to engage the fuzziness opens up the potential for transformation.¹⁶

Complicating matters is the idea that what is necessarily private or public at home may be more or less so private or public within the school. For example, students who make use of derogatory language at home may or may not learn what language is publicly acceptable. It isn't that the students are

¹⁴ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 134-138, 233-253.

¹⁵ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 275-279.

¹⁶ Macedo, 275-279.

prohibited from derogatory language, but there is a certain level of privacy that is engaged within public displays of profane language. The socially constructed version of derogatory language varies on the word/phrase in question. Therefore, a student who comes from a home where it is acceptable to use offensive language toward particular groups of people may have to learn to engage with alternate language when in a public space, especially the classroom. Deconstructing where the boundary is for the public and the private will take the student time, unless punitive punishment occurs that implies that particular words and phrases are never acceptable in public.

It is impossible to predict all the ways in which the public and private of students' lives will come into conflict within the classroom. Placing teachers in the center of such confrontation is not an easy endeavor, nor will a guideline on paper written as black and white provide an adequate basis on which the confrontation can be immediately squelched. This idea further problematizes the separation of the public and private to include moments throughout schooling when confrontation is not always identified as needing avoided in its enactedness versus on paper.

In other words, at some point, teachers will inevitably go against the separation of the public and private as stipulated in rules and/or to some degree the views of the family. In its enactedness, the confrontation isn't necessarily without benefit if the occurrence doesn't break with the teacher's and/or the school's socially constructed views of what is public and private. Therefore, the enactedness of the rule changes based on what the teacher and/or school views as both public and private, as well as the formative and/or educative nature of the teacher's response.

This is not necessarily against the aims of schooling. Teachers can immediately address the use of derogatory terminology in the classroom in two ways. First, formatively, the teacher can shut down the use of the word and/or punish the student, saying something such as, "We do not use bad words." The second option would be to turn toward the educative nature of the moment, addressing the situation by saying something more in line with "In this classroom, we do not use words that hurt people. That word hurts people because..." Of course, the age of the student factors into the language used to punish or make the moment educative. This, too, is at the discretion of the teacher, trained in development, but not in the "in-the-moment" meeting of public and private.

With the teacher at the center of the momentary judgment of what is private and public, one can identify that the enactedness of something can be located within different publics. Return to the student using derogatory language. Presume that the use of the language was an acceptable manifestation of the private in a particular community as public: a lowercase "p" public. If the community held the same notions of language as the broader Public writ large, the distinction of what is private for the capital "P" Public does not align with

the local public.¹⁷ On paper the distinction is clear: derogatory language doesn't belong in schools, but in practice, in its enactedness, the public uses the language in day-to-day interactions, so, why not in school?

Distinguishing between public, Public, and private is not a clear cut and well-defined endeavor. The private and the public seep into each other, blurring the lines of what is public and what is private, perhaps even more in their enactedness than on paper. Yet, establishing the notions of what is public and private is highly controversial in a diverse society, especially when public definitions clash with Public notions of the private and the public.

Knight Abowitz states that the smaller public needs to be included in the larger Public.¹⁸ Conceptualizing Macedo in a similar framework, the larger Public outweighs the smaller public for the good of the whole of the public. Nevertheless, I find them both insufficient in addressing the fundamental need for the ability to parse out the Public's view on what is sufficiently public and private. If we operate as Macedo suggests, students still do not possess the notion of what is inherently good for the public if they are not confronted with the publicness of the Public. Similarly, students cannot situate the smaller "p" public within the Public, as Knight Abowitz suggests, if they are unable to distinguish between the two.

CONCLUSION

Both evaluations remain problematic due to their lack of accounting for the fundamental basis on which we teach the Public to allow for publics and to decipher what is inherently public and private. Without a shared notion of what constitutes the public and the private, it is difficult to align with the arguments of Macedo, Knight Abowitz, and Stitzlein due to my experiences of the private always being present in some way within the K-12 classroom.

Thus, the lack of acknowledgement of the entanglement of the private life to the public life continues to be troublesome in the ways in which rules, codes of conduct, and expectations for separating the two continue to be developed and put into place in schools. We still expect and maintain that keeping the private out of the public within public schools and in the Public, writ large, is both attainable and already a well-developed phenomenon. Intrinsically, this sets up the Public and the public to possess varying expectations when engaging in discourse or other deliberative actions. Thus, citizens assume other citizens are acting in the best interest of the capital "P" Public, and that their private lives and interests are not wrapped up within their capital "P" Public actions and desires. They assume that the private, public, and Public interest are effectively separated.

Finally, the impression that teachers can control the seeping of their own private lives into the public is misguided. If teachers fail to acknowledge that their own conceptions of the public are informed by privately held beliefs,

²³ Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools*, 45.

¹⁸ Knight Abowitz, *Publics for Public Schools*, 41.

then they aren't forced to confront that their own ability to parse out the difference between the two is diminished. This calls into question teachers' ability to teach K-12 students how to do the same. While some knowledge can be transferred by the experience of the public and the private clashing, at times, parameters stifle the clash's transformative potential.

Allowing students the space for experiencing the clash and fuzziness of "boundaries" between private and public opens up the potential for Macedo's transformation to occur and for the small "p" public to be situated within the capital "P" Public as Knight Abowitz puts forth. It also allows for the potential development of students' and teachers' tolerance.²⁵ The crucial element is that both the private and the public need to be engaged within the fuzziness if we wish for students to understand what *is* public and what *is* private and to act with the notion of the Public good at the forefront, both in the classroom and as future citizens.

²⁵ Macedo, *Diversity and Distrust*, 66-87.
