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## Educating Publics in the Greater Community

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**ABSTRACT** Democratic public schooling prepares for and models collective self-governance in a complex society where the people are subject to various forms of governmental power. The common or public school is the main way democratic nations prepare their people for participation, yet in modern versions democracy is contested through school curriculum and governance practices. Examples are state-funded self-governing schools, which appear to support democracy, yet are shaped by a neoliberal ideal of school autonomy. Proposed new models of school governance that attempt to build in collectivity may still limit democratic participation. The influence of entities outside of nations challenges the view that a national system of schooling is sufficient to inform public opinion. A better education for democracy would consider how public opinion is formed, and how public opinion might be formed within a complex society. Developing a deeper and more expansive concept of the public is one place to start.

### Introduction

The common public school that spread from western Europe in the seventeenth century to the Americas and beyond was tied to a developing concept of nation state (Ramirez & Boli, 1986). This common school could be characterised as a school for a local public and its community, freely accessible and where children from diverse backgrounds share common experiences. Such a common school may serve a local public well. Yet, it may not serve well a nation state given its social complexity and pluralism. Dewey's (1927/2016) twentieth-century reflection on pluralist publics and their role in democracy, *The Public and Its Problems: an essay in political inquiry*, touches only peripherally on public schooling. Extrapolating from his position on the public and its relationship with community, public schools should prepare children to take on specialised roles in a differentiated yet equal great society. Schooling should also prepare them for participation in self-governance of this society, so that through their

collective endeavour it becomes a great community. This article picks up Dewey's argument and applies it to the twenty-first century where society is even more complex, and the nation state competes for governmental power with local, regional, transnational and global entities.

### **Governing Public Education**

Public schooling generally starts with the origins of compulsory schooling. Compulsory schooling, or what Ramirez and Boli (1987) term 'mass schooling', originates from western Europe and is associated with the development of the nation state. Mass schooling is a technology of statehood that asserts the legitimacy of a nation state as a member of a world society (Ramirez, 2012). The German state of Weimar in 1619 legislated for a compulsory education, and by the eighteenth century the wider ambitions of mass schooling were met by Prussia that provided schooling en masse to all its children. Compulsory education spread through Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Italy and eventually France and England, the dominant European powers at the time (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). Similar forms of schooling spread throughout Europe 'because this organizational strategy was the course of action most consistent with the developing Western European model of a national society' (p. 3). Unlike in Europe where democracy developed from earlier forms of state, democratic statehood in the United States grew from the bottom up as isolated communities became connected through infrastructure and the establishment of state-wide institutions (Dewey, 1927/2016). In this manner the United States' political processes developed differently from Europe, but at a societal level it developed a similar conceptualisation of nationhood and a similar institution of public schooling, influenced by the European models of mass schooling. The underlying principles of public schooling were recognisably democratic; that is, a 'free district school, sufficiently safe, and sufficiently good, for all the children within its territory' (Mann, 1957, p. 32, emphasis added) and advanced schooling with equality of access and a common or communal education that would foster familiarity and 'fraternal feeling' amongst children who lived close to one another yet may be quite different in other ways (p. 32). These are principles common to many modern state school systems and are evident today even though they are contested within societies that privilege individual over community interests. According to UNESCO's statistical release that accompanies their 2019 Global Education Monitoring Report, 73% of the world's 209 countries recognised by the United Nations legislated for nine years or more of compulsory primary and secondary schooling, the majority of which is free.

In New Zealand the government is poised to reform its public schooling system in a way not seen since the Tomorrow's Schools (1989) reforms. One area under consideration is school governance and organisational structure. My own research in this area is mainly in England and New Zealand (Boyask et al, 2008; Boyask, 2018), and these jurisdictions are interesting to compare. At

different times these countries both opted for governance in compulsory schooling in the form of individual school boards, enacting the policies of an arm's length central government within local communities. The introduction of this model through New Zealand's Tomorrow's Schools (1989) and England's Academies Act (2010) wrought changes that reproduced and exacerbated social inequalities in schools and failed to halt escalating economic inequality in both countries, despite intentions to address inequality through these policies. While appearing to be democratic by involving local people in the governance of their local school, self-governing schools actually work against democracy. In self-governing schools, the decisions are more business-like and less concerned with educational goals. There is uneven distribution in the quality of governance from school to school, with some communities richer in governance resources than others. The nature of those who participate in governance is limited by expectations that governors have professional and corporate skill-sets. Power of decision-making is more likely to shift towards leadership and executives and away from public opinion. Similar problems are paralleled in state-funded self-governing schools elsewhere such as the USA, Australia, Hong Kong and South Africa, yet similar models of governance appear in national educational systems and school autonomy remains a far-reaching, pervasive discourse and goal.

Official or intended policies in England and New Zealand respond to the problems arising from self-governing schools by encouraging amalgamations of schools, such as England's multi-academy trusts or New Zealand's communities of learning. Those critical of amalgamations such as these suggest they are too business-like, subjecting schooling and schoolchildren to the risks of the market and putting private interests in charge of public education. In England critics of single- and multi-academy trusts tend to look to educational history for a solution by reinvigorating local government so that it takes back governance of resources and services for schools. Communities of learning have a lesser role in governance than multi-academy trusts, and by and large New Zealand schools continue to be governed by their boards. However, the recent government-appointed taskforce, in its review of Tomorrow's Schools (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce, 2018), recommended governmental powers of boards be redeployed to a new middle tier of education hubs that are crown agencies, independent of the state, yet accountable to it, and governed by Ministerial appointed directors. School boards would be reoriented to focus on school vision, and teaching and learning, although the recommendations are under consultation and still some way from government policy.

New Zealand's education hubs, or the reinvigoration of England's local authorities, widens the scope of governance from local schools to regional centres, but in new ways limits participation in governance and weakens democracy. While the local authorities extend public participation in governance to a vote for representatives on Council, itself not exceptionally participatory, the proposed New Zealand model lengthens the distance of publics from decision-making through making the directors of their education hubs Ministerial appointments. The proposed alternatives in both the New

Zealand and English situations are also limited in that in some ways they represent traditionalist views of public education where the reach of governmental power and consequently its public is bounded by locality.

### Public Opinion

A challenge for democracy is establishing who participates in opinion formation and decision-making. When publics are weak, deliberation consists of opinion formation without the authority to render public opinion into decisions. Publics are stronger when their opinion counts, and the bodies that represent them can make authoritative decisions, thereby enacting 'the force of public opinion' (Fraser, 1990, p. 75). The quality of public opinion is not unproblematic, however. Feinstein (2015) discusses Dewey's (1922/1983) reflection on the nature of the public in a review of Lippmann's (1922/1997) book *Public Opinion*. According to Feinstein, Lippmann, in this book and his later *The Phantom Public*, had argued that the public of the twentieth-century nation state could not exist, not because of an individual's innate incapability for deliberation and opinion formation, but because the constraints of modern life limit individuals' capacity to know what is going on and collectively debate in an informed way. No one person can know all that is needed to be known to govern in a complex system (Feinstein, 2015). Dewey agreed with Lippmann in as much as he recognised the limits of public opinion within a complex society, but he did not support Lippmann's vision of a differentiated society where opinion-formation occurred between the holders of specialist knowledge and the officials of state charged with safeguarding the public's interest but divorced from the public. He saw the challenge for democracy of informing public opinion as a challenge for education, especially through the communication to the public of organised knowledge. He develops his argument further in *The Public and its Problems* (1927/2016):

Dissemination is something other than scattering at large. Seeds are sown, not by virtue of being thrown out at random, but by being so distributed as to take root and have a chance of growth.  
Communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion. (p. 198)

In Dewey's vision of democracy, the public rather than the state calls on experts to act on their behalf in securing their interests, while also informing and transforming their opinion. The representatives of the public who further the public interest through the state qua executive are therefore not only specialists in government, i.e. politicians and policy officials, but include all specialised roles such as 'expert school instructors, competent doctors, or business managers' (p. 155). An important implication of Dewey's conceptualisation of public opinion and its role in democratic governance is that it provides a critique of common schooling. While such a school may serve a local public well, it may not serve well a nation state given its social complexity and

pluralism. National governance and social functioning require specialised knowledge beyond what might be acquired by all in a common school. It also raises questions about the educational forms needed in a more complex democracy to negotiate twenty-first-century power dynamics.

### **The Greater Community of the Twenty-First Century**

Despite the imaginary of national sovereignty represented in public schooling, transnational structures such as multilateral formations, supranational organisations or privately governed corporations are very influential on national systems of schooling. For example, school autonomy is a global policy discourse that circulates in supranational organisations like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank and is played out through England's 'academy' and New Zealand's 'tomorrow' schools. Individuals may also experience global education policy discourses more directly through the circulation of power in transnational policy networks supported by communication technologies, influencing their opinions and choices about education (Ball, 2012). Yet considering the force majeure of educational policy discourses like high-stakes testing, school autonomy, accountability and school choice, there are few examples of democratic or impactful publics sustainably raising critical voices to directly counteract governmental power exercised transnationally, or to exert democratically their opinion on transnational decision making.

The problems of, and the proposed yet inadequate solution to, democracy of self-governing schools are themselves transnational in nature. So there is need for education policy that can cope with the challenges of democratic governance in a complex, transnational society. In a democracy education should prepare for and model not just local or national democratic governance but also transnational governance, so that informed public opinion and decision making speaks back to the transnational entities or configurations that influence the lives of citizens. The idea of a transnational public sphere that operates beyond nation-state boundaries has become accepted in common parlance (Fraser, 2014), especially when talking about arenas for communication that cross national boundaries. The association of political discussion with social media sites like Twitter and Facebook has prompted some to claim they operate as a transnational public sphere, yet the contradictions they present and the asymmetries in power associated with their use suggest they have more in common with the vehicles of news criticised by Lippmann for informing poor public opinion (Fuchs, 2013). Dewey's position on the public and its relationship with community is compatible with his view that schools integrally connected to the different facets of social and public life are important for preparing children to take on specialised, interdependent roles in the democratic governance of the great society of a nation. Schools and education as currently conceived have strong boundaries and are set apart from public life. Following Dewey, questions for future education policy include how to weaken the

boundaries between schools and pluralist publics? What would education for preparation in democracy within multiple public spheres, including transnational and global democracy, look like? And how would it be governed? While answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this short article, an important underpinning for future development of education is an adequate concept of the public that can respond to governmental power that operates across traditional boundaries.

Public opinion acquires legitimacy and political efficacy in a critical theory of democracy only if participants are legitimately constituted as a public. The presupposition of democracy is that it is a self-referential political system – that is, political power is exercised through collective self-rule – yet this premise presents challenges when the public extends beyond national boundaries as in a transnational society. Where are the boundaries of a transnational public? Dewey (1916/1966) was critical of associating democracy with nationalism, where democratic rights were conferred by national citizenship, granted through the effects of government or through pre-legitimising characteristics such as ethnicity. Education for democracy based on a concept of national citizenship ‘narrowed the conception of the social aim to those who were members of the same political unit and reintroduced the idea of the subordination of the individual to the institution’ (p. 76). The same criticisms might be applied to delineating the public associated with the governing body of a self-governing school by school enrolments and employment or in a local authority to residents and ratepayers.

Many modern democrats, and indeed Dewey (1927/2016), delineate the public through a democratic all-affected principle, where ‘having one’s interests affected intrinsically grounds a right of democratic say’ (Abizadeh, 2012) and confers citizenship on the affected. When the all-affected principle is applied to establish the limits of a national citizenry it produces ‘fickle boundaries’ (Karlsson, 2006), and makes it hard to judge legitimacy. Legitimate boundaries of the people in the governance of transnational relations are even harder to discern, where there is less clarity about who has a legitimate right to participate and who constitutes the public. An alternative way to identify the public in transnational democracy is the application of the all-subjected principle (Karlsson, 2006; Fraser, 2010; Abizadeh, 2012). Under this principle the boundary of a public is defined by subjection to law. In discussing the limits of justice, Fraser (2010) says that all those who ‘are subject to a given governance structure have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it’ and defines the limits of the people that self-rule as ‘their joint subjection to a structure of governance that sets the ground rules that govern their interaction’ (p. 65). While the effect of state legislation on its citizens is the obvious example of being subject to the law, Fraser (2014) suggests that what counts as a governance structure can be conceived broadly to encapsulate more than just mechanisms of state and includes different local, regional, national and transnational agencies. Subjection can be conceived broadly to include many varieties of coercive power, and also include the regulatory effects of discourses.

The all-subjected principle and its use in defining the public of democracy is further theorised by Abizadeh (2012), who argues that the boundaries of the public are constituted through the practice of self-rule. That is, the public is in principle unbounded until it is constituted through the act of democratic governance.

Defining the public through a principle of subjection and constituted through self-rule provides a much more nuanced picture of what may count as public schooling than the commonly used but heavy-handed distinction between public and private sector education that is tied to a notion of a democratic state. It is also a more inclusive definition, recognising that boundaries are not drawn according to some pre-legitimising criteria. However, education for the self-creating and self-organised public (Warner, 2002) presents some controversial options for those in education who oppose policies of differentiated and specialised schooling associated with privatisation and deregulated market relations.

In conceptualising counter-publics, Fraser (1990) raised the possibility that strong alternative publics may exist within self-governing institutions, and as units of sovereignty alternative to the dominant public of the nation state.

One set of questions concerns the possible proliferation of strong publics in the form of self-managing institutions. In self-managed work-places, child care centers, or residential communities, for example, internal institutional public spheres could be arenas both of opinion formation and decision-making. (Fraser, 1990, pp. 75-76)

While these examples are of governance at a local level, the argument is important for thinking about how to construct an education system based upon an all-subjected principle and extend public governance to all kinds of emergent entities. Within even small self-organised entities is the possibility of internal democratic relations. When entities are small difficulty may lie in establishing democratic relations with other sovereign entities, especially larger and more authoritative entities that do not share democratic values of equality and social justice (Fraser, 1990). This is apparent when groups attempt to co-opt self-governing schools like academy and tomorrow's schools for democratic ends. Accountability to an unjust policy can destabilise an institution's aims for justice (Abowitz, 2010). However, it also highlights the importance of pursuing accountability of large and powerful transnational self-organising entities to strong transnational publics. Following Dewey, education has an important role in establishing this form of democracy.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The inadequacy of education for informing public opinion and self-governance in the first part of the twenty-first century parallels debate in the early twentieth century. Lippmann and Dewey differed in opinion on the role of the public in a national democracy, yet both agreed that what then counted for public opinion

was crudely developed from partial knowledge, consumption of news from mass media and open to manipulation. While Lippmann proposed further restriction of public responsibilities, diverting them to governmental administration and an elite pool of experts, Dewey reconceptualised publics and the vital role they may come to play in national governance through education. The role of a public in a complex society is not for each individual to develop an informed position on every decision to be made and not to relegate governance decisions to state bureaucrats, but to make informed decisions of governance about who is most knowledgeable and most able to manage the different facets of society, such as education, law, health and so on. Valid public opinion is formed not through access to a cacophony of different knowledge, but through direct engagement with enough systematised and worthwhile knowledge to inform decisions about the appointment and evaluation of expert decision-makers working on behalf of publics.

In New Zealand the three-tier governance structure of central government, education hubs and reconfigured boards outlined in the Tomorrow's Schools review might fulfil this vision of national democracy if the hub governors and school trustees are elected through informed public opinion rather than state appointments. Leaving aside the challenge for these elections of educating a public who may currently be uninformed, another problem is that it ignores the transnational influences on the people and their education, and their incapacity to rule on decisions that emanate beyond the state and to which they are subjected. Democracy can be extended within a transnational context by drawing upon views of the public as pluralist, polyvocal, emergent around structures of governance (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002), and by drawing upon an all-subjected principle that locates sovereignty in the people subjected to their own self-rule in its many permutations and across traditional institutional boundaries (Fraser, 2010; 2014; Abizadeh, 2012).

Dewey emphasised the connectedness of people (Feinstein, 2015), and that their interrelationships transcend the limitations of individuals. He also thought the individual should not be subsumed by institutions. Technological and industrial modernisation had disarticulated citizens from the public sphere and their public roles through increased specialisation and social complexity. In moving from local to national communities the public had ceased to recognise itself and its deliberative role in shaping society and state formation. Dewey conceptualised the need of the great community that brought democracy to the modern society and state, reflecting its complexity and differentiation. Since Dewey was writing society has become more complex through advanced technological change and economic globalisation. Early public education reformers were influenced by policy developments in other nations (Mundy et al, 2016), as the expansion of compulsory schooling shows (Ramirez & Boli, 1987). Mundy et al argue that more recent education policy reform goes beyond the policy borrowing of the nineteenth century and is shaped at national levels by sustained and organised international policy setting. The pluri-lateral agreements between states and supranational infrastructure such as



the United Nations and OECD reflect that decision-making in twenty-first-century globalism extends beyond the nation state. To follow Dewey's line of reasoning, democracy requires an even greater community of global or transnational proportions. A Deweyan perspective highlights equality and interconnections between different publics. The implication is for a pluralist public education, schools that respond to the specialist needs of a complex and interdependent global or 'greater' society and that prepare children for collective self-rule within different governance structures to which they are subject.

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