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Public Education Unbounded: Reflection on the Publicness of Green School New Zealand

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Green School New Zealand is a private school whose school fees confirm for critics the inequity of private education, but the school may contribute to an alternative vision of public education if its commitment to sustainability is recognised as a public good. Conventional understanding of public education is challenged by contemporary political and democratic theory on the nature of publics. While public education generally refers to education funded by the state, if public education is limited to education provided by the state it restricts the good that it can do because the state is not equitable in whose interests it serves. Concepts of public education need updating to reflect understandings of varied publics and the individuals of which they are comprised (pluralist publics); the freedom of publics in subjectivity and sovereignty (unbounded publics); and the mutuality and equality of relations within publics (publicness). Green School New Zealand undoubtedly works against public interests in some respects; however, its focused concern for the environment represents an emergent publicness that is not apparent in schools that are more closely bound to the priorities of the state. When we recognise their public dimensions, schools like Green School New Zealand may help with rethinking public education and how we develop new systems of education that act for the good of pluralist, unbounded but connected publics.

Keywords: public education, education policy, democracy and education, pluralist publics, unbounded publics

The day after funding of NZ$11.7 million to the private Green School New Zealand as part of the government's $3 billion "shovel-ready" projects fund for pandemic relief was announced by Green Party leader and Associate Minister of Finance James Shaw the Quality Public Education Coalition (QPEC) put out a media release condemning the decision (QPEC, 2020). The press release of this coalition of parents and educators who are advocates for quality, social justice and equity in public education acted as a catalyst for an ensuing public debate. QPEC's release represented a strand of the argument concerned that public funds were being used to financially benefit private business, and that the funds would be more usefully spent on upgrading substandard public-school buildings. Criticism of public funding of private education is paralleled in many other polarized debates between public and private education. Similar arguments in support of public education include opposition to market competition in early childhood education, the privatisation of schooling through Charter schools, or the expansion of edu-businesses that provide school improvement services. Yet answering all challenges to public education with the solution of more public education papers over the contradictions in public education itself. It is unrealistic to champion public education as a universal and unproblematic good. Regardless of how well education is understood, it will not be clear what is in the public interest unless we in education have clear understandings of differences in how publics are constructed and conceived. Concepts of public education need updating to reflect contemporary understandings of publics and the peoples of

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which they are comprised, exemplified in this article through using the calculative, emergent, and normative typology of Mahony and Stephansen (2017). This line of argument is not intended to undermine the importance of public education or valorise its adversary, private education, but argues for more carefully understanding public education and the contradictions evident in its polemical debates with private education.

Political theory and policy sociology problematise the nature of the public and its interests. Yet in its academic study and professional practice public education is generally understood reductively as a public good located in the public sector of the state. While others have tackled problems in perceiving the good of public education as universal (Labaree, 1997; Gerrard, 2015), in this article it is the publicness (changing qualities of being public (Newman, 2007)) of state activity and infrastructure that is called into question.

Educational studies commonly problematise the state, especially the restricted or eroded contemporary state that has transformed national education systems through its neoliberal ideologies and mechanisms of the market. Privatisation in state services and expansion of public private partnerships to address social priorities makes it difficult to distinguish between public and private interests or entities and boundaries are blurred. "Reducing the public in public education to a location in the state sector is not helpful when the state sector has eminently permeable boundaries and the state acts, at least in significant part, in the interests of elite individuals and the corporations that support them" (Boyask, 2020, p.6). A public bounded by the state is also restricted by the Eurocentric and patriarchal history of the nation state. The public good is not always served by the state through misrecognition or neglect of the public, regulation that goes awry, because others who are not agents of state also serve the public interest or through variation between actual state policy and its enactment. Is it that we need more state to resolve these inconsistencies, or do we need to understand better the public and what is in its interests?

According to Mahony and Stephansen (2017) there are in current academic literature three ways that publics are generally conceptualised. The first is a conceptualisation of a public as a discrete, bounded entity that is knowable through calculative measures. This is how the public for public policy is often established. An example is the public that corresponds with the citizenry of the nation New Zealand whose characteristics can be known through survey. Public policy makers ascertain what is in the public interests through surveying the public. Examples from education policy include the Ministry of Education's school roll returns that identify need through quantifying broad categories of ethnicity and gender, or the decile system for school funding that is calculated from socio-economic indicators from the national Census of Population and Dwellings. This is the public imaginary of public sector schooling. Contradictions in this public are not hard to find. A calculable, bounded and generally singular public is defined by pre-legitimising criteria, "such as in the case of a democratic nation state where the criteria for legitimacy comes through commonality in culture or ethnicity prior to a state of democracy" (Boyask, 2020, p. 156). Boundaries established through pre-legitimising criteria are anti-democratic because they contradict the democratic right to self-sovereignty; they present challenges for the sovereignty of different peoples who live within national borders. Even within Aotearoa New Zealand where there are two peoples represented in governance through Te Tiriti o Waitangi these peoples are constrained through their representation in official definitions. Other peoples who are not New Zealand citizens but subject to the regulation of government are excluded from self-rule,

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such as visa holders or refugees not represented by the Crown. Publics defined through pre-legitimised boundaries do not take account of the pluralism and dynamism of identities that are challenged and recreated, such as children and young people whose cultural identities are fluid and multiple.

A second view of publics is based in emergence theory. Emergent publics convene through self-organising relations between strangers and are constituted by the attention of an audience (Warner, 2002) rather than established by pre-legitimising criteria. Accounts of publics from an emergence orientation put emphasis on their "mediated, reflexive and indeterminate qualities" (Mahony & Stephansen, 2017, p.40). Emergent publics are understood in the plural, called into existence rather than pre-existing, diverse in who they speak to and how, are shaped by affect and supported by different means of technology or material resources. Emergent publics are unbounded and pluralist. This conceptualisation of publics fits better with a contemporary view of identities as changing and various, acknowledges collectivism, and embodies transgressive forms of social organisation such as social movement activism, citizen media and interactive technologies (Mahony & Stephansen, 2017).

A third view of publics is what Mahony and Stephansen term normative publics. These are publics that are defined by principles or an ideal and are commonly associated with the ideal of democracy. Democracy and the public sphere are related in Habermas's influential conceptualisation of the bourgeoisie public sphere as a space for debate and opinion-formation that forms alongside the development of the democratic nation state. Critiques of the Eurocentric and patriarchal nature of the public sphere from critical theory have extended rather than quashed the notion of the public sphere, proffering theories of subaltern or counter-public spheres that challenge mainstream publics (Fraser, 1990). That is, publics are pluralist interrelated spheres where different discourses circulate and are debated, and they inform, influence, and motivate different formations of governance to a greater or lesser degree. This is a provocative idea for supporters of public education if their assumption is that public equals state because the implication of that assumption for public schooling is that the governance structure of most significance is government. Pluralism of the public sphere decentres power and authority from the state to other publics, possibly counter-publics and smaller self-governing units such as individual schools that are separate from state yet may also be democratic. However, Mahony & Stephansen offer a different challenge to democratic and pluralist publics, suggesting that they are limited because normative publics are defined by an ideal of a shared culture, negating the emergence of publics and fixing identities within them. Their argument parallels the boundary problem in democracy and described above when referring to publics defined through calculative measures. That is, a normative democratic public is established by the pre-legitimising criterion of its ideal. Yet political theory offers a tentative and partial resolution to democracy's boundary problem through the all-subjected principle, which is where "the legitimacy of the people is not predefined by a democratic ideal but emerges from the practice of self-rule by all who are subjected to the rule" (Boyask, 2020, p. 156).

A democratic public is unbounded "because the 'who' of the public is established through its constitution as a collective engaged in the work of self-governance" (p.156), yet because democratic self-rule is based in ideals of equality and informed opinion it is welcoming to education (in the sense of whatever is worthy of the name (Dewey, 1938)). Not all groups that emerge and act as publics support educational values, because some groups perceive indoctrination rather than education as in their best interest. While

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emergence theories of publics seem to describe the complex array of relations and identities present in 2020, their offer to education is increased inequity in its distribution because an emergent public is no more open to relations of equality than it is to relations of oppression. Mahony & Stephansen (2017) in describing emergent publics stress the emergence of progressive relations such as co-production and participation, yet emergent publics are also established in response to fundamentalist and conservative causes co-producing and participating in popularist opinions like we are seeing in the advance of QAnon conspiracy theory and religious fundamentalisms opposing Covid-19 public health measures. Democratic publics are distinguished because unlike some other forms of public they can support relations of equality and social justice. A democratic theory of publics can describe the complexity of the era without fixity and promote equity across difference through emergence from an all-subjected principle, which defines the practices of collective subjectivity and sovereignty that we might regard as a precondition of publicness (Fraser, 2010; Abizadeh, 2012). So how do we form educational institutions that respond to the needs and interests of pluralist, unbounded, democratic publics?

In my book I conclude that three principles ought to underpin future discussion and recomposition of public education. The first two are described above: first the principle of pluralism, built on presumptions of difference between and within publics, and equality between different subjectivities; and second unboundedness so that legitimacy for self-rule is established democratically through the practice of self-rule. The third principle concerns paying attention to the strength and quality of relations within and between publics. Do they support mutual and equal relations? When publics are plural and unbounded emerging through the practices of self-rule they come into relation with one another and other forms of governance, such as authoritarian or market relations, and through their relations are changed. This is the conditionality of publics. Rather than viewed as public or private entities publics can be examined for the quality of publicness. The publicness of public education is partial and contextual when this publicness is conceptualised in a relational framework. Schools simultaneously are privatised and sustain some qualities of publicness. A market driven education system constrains democratic publics through market-like governance. An understanding of the extent and nature of publicness in actually existing educational settings is needed for negotiating tensions between market and democratic relations.

Which brings me back to consider the publicness of Green School New Zealand. Green School is not just an exception from mainstream state-funded schools, it is a private school unlike most other private schools. It does not aim to provide a traditional elite education like St Cuthbert's or Christ's Colleges but operates from its own philosophy. In a report on schools for the future the World Economic Forum (2020) contends the philosophy of Green School is founded in global citizenship and sustainability. It is on these grounds that the school aims to do good in the world. Although from reviewing the school website, some of its practices and values are likely to come into conflict with the notion of good from a democratic perspective. For example, the school has a strong ethos of business-focused entrepreneurship and competition, and charges annual school fees of between $16,000 and $43,000 for students which makes access inequitable. The school attracts students from around the world rather than from its local community, which differentiates it further from early ideals of state-funded public schooling where all within a locality would share a common experience of education. The coronavirus pandemic pressurized communities and put them under financial strain, leading the government to make new and swift decisions about finances and releasing funds. Rather than a decision

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on education, this decision was justified on its potential contribution to the local economy. Educators seemed to think otherwise and challenged the decision on the grounds that it contradicted the value of equity in education held dear in New Zealand. The QPEC media release was at the beginning of a wave of anger and outrage expressed towards the decision. This might suggest New Zealand is more acutely sensitive to unfairness, but I have some reservations given that similar popular outrage is not stimulated when mainstream publicly funded schools do not distribute fairly the good of education amongst all students who attend them. Seeing the allocation of government funding to Green School New Zealand as a battle between public and private education singularises and bounds the public, excluding some public interests and privileging others. Yet my previous research indicates that even private schools may exhibit qualities of publicness of relevance to debates on public education; on educational grounds does Green School New Zealand demonstrate publicness and if so, what is its extent?

A satisfactory answer to this question requires deeper investigation than the knowledge I have gained of the school through its website and recent media debates, but I can compare it with similar schools that I have researched more thoroughly, that is English private schools committed to the public good (Boyask, 2015; Boyask, 2020). Early debates from the 17th to 19th century between public and private education focused on public schools like Eton and Winchester Colleges (which today are elite private schools) that catered to the middle-class expansion that took children's education out of the home and into the realm of the public. These debates are gendered because generally girls' education was restricted to the domestic or private sphere, but gradually schooling outside the home opened to girls. Since then private schools in England have become associated with an elite faction of society, fee-paying and traditional education, yet a tradition also continued of private schools that were concerned with the public good. Some were explicitly democratic progressive, self-governing schools such as Homer Lane's Little Commonwealth (1916) and A.S. Neill's school Summerhill (1921). In New Zealand, this tradition influenced schools in both the state (Auckland Metropolitan College and Four Avenues Alternative School) and private school sectors (Tamariki School). Today in England some schools like these continue to act in the public interest through the promotion of democracy in intake, curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, or school outcomes even though they are located in the private sector (Boyask, 2015). It might be argued that Green Schools and other alternative visions of schooling in New Zealand like Peace Experiment or The Forest School are continuing this tradition, but with twenty-first century concerns for culture, community, and environment. While their contribution to the public good is likely lessened by their need to pursue profit, it is an oversimplification to say schools like Green School New Zealand do not contribute to the public good at all because they are situated in the private sector.

If the school acts on its philosophy, it might contribute towards sustainability and make a difference to the perspectives of those within its community. The school might even forge good relations with the local iwi and community through immersion in the locality, as it aspires to do, even though my prior research suggests this is unlikely. What the school offers a wider conversation on education is that its emergent publicness is an alternative to the mainstream publicness of state-sector schooling in New Zealand. These public qualities viewed alongside conceptualisations of contemporary publics might help with rethinking how we develop systems that act for the good of pluralist, unbounded but connected publics. The conversation needs to start by recognising that in a complex, multi-faceted world we need more than one kind of schooling. The difficult part for

government is establishing different kinds of schooling in a way that is equitable across different publics. Individual schools and school types that sit outside of the mainstream may provide clues for what a differentiated school system based on equity and democracy rather than competition might look like. Consider for example the public good of kura kaupapa Māori. Unfortunately, most of New Zealand's experiments with different forms of schooling, like private and partnership schools, have not started from principles of equity and democracy but quite the opposite.

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