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Publicness in Education Through Alienation and Shared Experiences of Negativities

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In this response paper, I begin by carefully engaging with the concerns raised during the symposium "Reclaiming the Publicness of Education" at the Nordic Education Research Association (NERA) conference held in Helsinki, Finland, in March 2025. I do so by highlighting key issues addressed by each of the contributing authors in relation to these concerns. Drawing inspiration from psychoanalytical theory (Lacan, 1997; McGowan, 2024) and political philosophy (Sloterdijk, 2016), I then reflect on how publicness—as a vital realm in education—can be conceptualized and embraced as central to what makes education educational. In this regard, I draw on notions of alienation, emancipation, and displacement. Importantly, I do not approach publicness as a shared realm in a positive, socio-symbolic sense within education. Rather, I argue for a conception of publicness as a space where subjects—understood as whatever-beings (singular subjects) without fixed determinations and beyond identities—can share their negativities (experiences of non-belonging, lack, and absence) in common. This, I contend, opens up possibilities for restructuring—and even a disruption—of the unequal socio-symbolic order that is typically foreclosed. This foreclosure, I posit, stems from, for example, the fixation of this order around dominant symbolic positions and identities, which tend to contaminate public realms with private interests in education.

A Responsive Engagement

In the following, I briefly engage with each of the four paper presentations and some of the topics and problematics they addressed during the symposium as well as with a paper included in this special issue that was not part of the symposium. In his paper "The Publicness of Education: To Stay in the World With Others," Säfström (2025) passionately argues for a democratic publicness in education, which he conceptualizes as a sensible realm, that is, a space in which singular subjects—as equals—can share their experiences and engagements in and with the world alongside others. What becomes crucial in this sense is an assumed equality of the sensible: no one holds a privileged position to determine which sensibilities, that is, which—perceptions of the world—are of most importance and must be heard as sound, and which are irrelevant and should be silenced as noise.

Such assumed equality, I claim in line with Säfström, does rarely exist in education. The perceptual field is highly regulated in ways that determine what can—and must—be seen, heard and felt as relevant and valuable. What is heard and seen in education, in this regard, are only those matters that have a concrete usefulness and can be mobilized to solve various social, economic, and moral problems (OECD, 2019). Moreover, the relevance and usefulness of education are frequently judged by its ability to satisfy

the (job)market's desire for a compliant, non-critical, and loyal working force. One without a critical voice and without the lack of freedom to resist being made into means for predetermined ends (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2025).

This narrow focus on education is convincingly criticized by Biesta (2025), who challenges prevailing definitions of what counts in and as education. In his paper, "Education as a Public Good: Why Equal Opportunities Are Not Enough," Biesta argues that a narrow technical and instrumental approach to education not only affects what can be brought into being in and through education but also limits what education can be in an ontological sense. When framed in countable and measurable terms, education becomes delinked from existential matters and from its potential to support emancipation through democracy and the verification of equality. This is why education, when understood in narrow and instrumental terms, can continue to reproduce inequality and serve as a servant to the dominant socio-symbolic (master) order and its market orientation (Heck et al., 2025).

How education serves the dominant order and its focus on predetermined ends that yield economic returns is brilliantly described by Salokangas and Maglaperidze (2025). In their paper, "Commodification of Public Education for the Global Market: Finnish International Schools," they demonstrate how Finnish education, including its curriculum in a vulgar way, has become commodified and sold as an optimistic product, one that comes with what Berlant (2011) calls cruel promises. To make education exportable, it must be detached from concrete contexts and rendered abstract, stripped of the "cultural mediation that gives curriculum its life and meaning," as Salokangas and Maglaperidze (2025, p. 5) argue. The colonial influences become clear. Educational success, exemplified by PISA scores, increasingly demands conformity to "the Finnish way."

However, this raises the question of how we can struggle for a publicness in education where focus is on concrete, singular subjects who are culturally and contextually embedded while at the same time avoid being captured by edu-businesses formulas. That is, standardization, metrics, and market driven curricula. This question is of utmost importance if education is to be able to be not only "for the public but also education of the public" (Säfström & Biesta, 2023, p. 4). For how can one, as a singular and indeterminable subject, step forward and come into being if there is no pluralistic publicness to take part in, for example, in education?

I believe this question reflects one of the key issues that Oyler (2025) compellingly addresses in his paper "The Plural Self as Public Self in Education." Stepping forward into the world as a singular subject in front of others is not an easy task if the realms in a priory sense determine how it must and can be done. Therefore, as Oyler underscores, freedom must be able to appear in public realms within education. A freedom to do otherwise and to be able to be released (or to release oneself) as a singular subject from socio-symbolic predeterminations, regulations, and configurations. This becomes vitally important, not only for the democratic-education nexus aiming at the verification of equality, but also for what it might mean to exist and come into being in and through public education.

Finally, in the article included in this special issue but not featured in the symposium, Tony Carusi argues for a shift in focus in how we understand publicness. Grounding his argument in the U.S. public education, Carusi walks us through Arendtian conception of the public, and its paralyzing effect in how it places public in a fatal narrative. He then offers Habermas's notion of the public as an alternative by arguing that it allows us to turn from a narrative of decline of the public to dialogue and opposition by the public. For the educational community interested in the publicness of education and of public schools in particular, this shift in conception offers a "dialectical model of the public different from a theory of the public-past to the extent that it becomes a discourse of opposition, rather than a narrative of decline" (Carusi, 2026, p. 63).

Psychoanalytical and Political Considerations

Against this background, I now turn to the work of Lacan (1997), McGowan (2024), and Sloterdijk (2016). Drawing on their insights, I want to outline some ideas for how we can re-conceptualize *publicness* as a realm in education in which we, as singular subjects, can come into being by disrupting the existing order, including the symbolic positions and identities that are (re)produced within. In psychoanalytical terms, such disruption involves not "giving ground relative to one's desire" (Lacan, 1997, p. 321), even when this conflicts with dominant norms, moral expectations, and the demands of productivity that push one to desire otherwise, that is, in accordance with what the big Other wants.

Put differently, it means that we, for example, must be willing to critically engage with the ways in which our desires may be *captured* or *shaped* in instrumental ways within the socio-symbolic order that may obscure what truly matter to us. This includes questioning how our desires might be structured around what (objects) we believe we should—but do not necessarily wish to—strive for in order to live up to societal norms, expectations and "wants-scripts" that operate in education. Wants-scripts can be understood as the imagined desires of the big Other—represented by leading authorities—and what we think the big Other wants us to desire as well. Such questioning can disrupt—or at least install a pause in—the service of goods we participate in (Lacan, 1997). A service orientated toward a moral good and the production of goods that can fulfil various wants, such as the (labour) market's desire for a loyal, employable and flexible working force. In other words, certain forms of questioning can get us to think carefully on what is desirable about the desires we hold on to or are driven by. What educational value do such desires reflect, support, and hinder?

Publicness – A Realm for Sharing What We Do Not Have

It seems like education cannot function without its systems of classification and the apparatuses that operate through positive determinations of recognizable symbolic positions and identities. Classifications—framed in a "positive" sense—create various kinds of communities within the educational field. In this way, education contributes to the reinforcement of symbolic violence, which is constitutive of today's education per se. Such reinforcement keeps "people in a particular symbolic position" and serves to "reassure … that everyone and everything still has a ['right'] place" (McGowan, 2024, p. 69). However, it mirrors one of the ways in which education contributes to perpetuating the existing socio-symbolic order. One could argue that it has become increasingly difficult to avoid the dominance of communities in education—communities that are structured around inequalities between those who belong in the "right" ways and are able to occupy privileged positions, and those who do not belong in such ways and are excluded from such positions. As already mentioned, some of the most powerful communities in education are closely linked to logics of solutionism and problem-solving, shaped by private (market) interests, desires, and needs. These logics have sidelined public realms and ignored more democratic, ethical, and emancipatory aspirations and desires for education.

Following McGowan (2024), it is important to distinguish between a community and the public. A community provides the subject with a form of identity and belonging. Even when this belonging is marginal—what might be called a kind of "non-belonging"—it still offers a form of social recognition and concealment against alienation. The public, by contrast, does the opposite: it "exists through the community's failure to fully constitute itself" (p. 112). Both exist, according to McGowan (2024) "in a dialectical relation" (p. 112). Whereas communities offer places and spaces of socio-symbolic recognition, the public *disrupts* through its alienation, suspension, and displacement of the given order of things. It is within public realms that we, as singular subjects, can step forward for one another, released from socio-symbolic categorizations, classifications, and predicates, by refusing to occupy predetermined positions and recognizable identities (Agamben, 1990). In doing so, we can appear as equal singular subjects, or as whatever-beings, without fixed identities, belongings or capacities.

In other words, it is in the public that we can step forward as "uncoded lives.". This means that it is in the public that we—as singular subjects—can be released from the particularities imposed on us and take up *indeterminate* (non-fixated) positions that do not make sense within the existing socio-symbolic order and its codification of subjectivities (Phelan & Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2021). Within public realms, we can be displaced from the given order of things, opening up possibilities for sharing experiences of negativities—such as alienation, lack and absence—with others who likewise do not experience full belonging, conflict-free existence, or the freedom to desire otherwise. Without such displacement—and the disruption of the given order of things—emancipation becomes impossible.

But it is exactly this displacement, for example, "from the tyranny of the given" (McGowan, 2024, p. 92), or from common sense, that becomes difficult or even seems almost impossible to make possible within education. In educational contexts, subjects are often assigned specific positions and identities that protect against alienation and the engagement with negativities such as lack of knowledge and certainty. That is why we can continue to remain stuck in conformity and think, desire, and act in particular ways: "We know (or think we do) what is expected of us!" "Keep going!" "Don't stop!" "Act, don't think (too much)!" "We know what we must desire and what we must become" But how do we actually know this? "Who has told us that?" "And how do they know?"

It is as if we believe we are "free" as long as we do not have to confront our own alienation. Yet freedom is the exact opposite. If freedom is to be taken seriously, alienation must be acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored or masked. Embracing alienation is, for example, linked to the willingness or "ability to leave one's assigned social place and move elsewhere …. Emancipation requires recognizing the appeal of displacement rather than longing for a home that no one has ever had" (McGowan, 2024, pp. 42–43). To put it another way, we must be willing to abandon or decouple our desire from the seductive idea of a particular, harmonizing, moral place that promises universal goodness.

However, we are constantly encouraged to "carry on working" because "work must go on" (Lacan, 1997, p. 315), a motto perpetuated by today's "propaganda scientists and alchemists" (p. 324), who offer all kinds of promises of a common good. But what common good? Why should, for example, an imaginary universal idea of such goodness be something we all must desire? And is there not a danger in operating with a term like *all*, which often obscures the fact that *all*, without exception, does not exist? The reason is that the term *all* always contains an inner split and is marked by division, contradiction, and incompleteness—conditions that make any notion of wholeness impossible.

When the Good is Not SO Good!

What things have to be done in the name of the good in education? We do not have to speculate long before realizing that goodness—or the good end—in education is often expressed in (labour) market terms and linked to notions of labourfication and solutionism (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2025). This way of thinking, education as an instrumental means to such ends, risks eliminating the possibilities for alienation (to think, do, and be otherwise) and emancipation (a chance for displacement). Perhaps one of the problems—among others, of course—is that education is expected to have an end, often one that is assumed to be a good one. Yet this notion of a fixed end is deeply problematic as it closes down spaces for thought, questioning, and amazement. What is more, the idea of the good often points us away from things and matters that might lead to "unpleasant and unwelcome confusion" (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 2), which might provoke critical thinking and questioning. Why, then, is a particular notion about goodness considered to be good? Why should it be considered good (as it often is the case in education) to maintain the existing socio-symbolic order, including our "self-preservation [within this order] that will demand unusual achievement of us" (p. 6)?

However, our desires in and around education are expected to be orientated toward securing and perpetuating the service of goods, which defers any serious wondering about what we actually desire and about what is desirable in this context. As Lacan puts it: "Let's keep on working, and as far as desire is

concerned, come back later" (Lacan, 1997, p. 318). Does Lacan not conceptualize what continues to be so problematic for many of us in education, namely how it keeps us busy? In a similar vein, as Sloterdijk (2016) suggests, this busyness establishes wonder-free-zones that hinder, or even prevent, us together with others in the public from withdrawing from business-as-usual in ways that hold emancipatory potential. To do business otherwise means refusing to take part in educational communities that function solely as preparation for the (labour) market and/or for instrumental problem-solving.

Education as a "Bed of Roses"

I agree with many of the concerns articulated in the symposium papers I have responded to, particularly regarding the current status of education. For example, the way education—as a public matter—has been infiltrated by private agendas, logics, and interests (Biesta, 2025; Salokangas & Maglaperidze, 2025). This development poses a serious threat to the very meaning of publicness in education and raises critical questions about whether—and in what ways—public realms still can exist within this field (Oyler, 2025). Realms in which alienation can take place. In this regard, and if we are to take education's emancipatory potential seriously, we must resist framing education solely through a logic of goodness. This logic is often translated into an overarching "good thing"—or a notion of the common good—that must be imposed on all and acted out on behalf of us all. However, this might be one of the persistent problems that we continue to struggle with in education.

Instead of orienting our desire toward such common goodness—often based on two false forms of positive universalism: one that promises neutrality and one that promises inclusion for all (Kapoor & Zalloua, 2022)—we should instead embrace pluralistic, democratic struggles for public spaces in education. Spaces in which we as singular subjects can share our experiences with negativities, that is, the lacks, absences, and contradictions we experience as a part of our existence, both individually and collectively (Rüsselbæk Hansen, 2024).

In such spaces, wondering can emerge and prompt us to think carefully about how we might come into being as displaced subjects without predetermined belongings and without conforming, or restricting our desires to align with what others, for example, politicians, policymakers, and market actors want us to do in the name of the so-called "common" good. This good often demands that we hurtle ahead as instrumental service providers of goods (Sloterdijk, 2016), which prevents participation in pluralistic democratic engagements where equality can be verified and where shared experiences with negativities, both socially and individually can be addressed, discussed, and brought into the open (Säfström, 2025).

This is not always a pleasurable affair; it can metaphorically "scratch" you like roses and mark you for life. Nevertheless, it might lead to an educational life no longer configured around optimistic promises of goodness, betterment, and development. Promises that often conceal the darker sides—or the constitutive undesirable others/otherness—within the contemporary, hegemonic socio-symbolic order. Instead, it can foster an educational life where ethico-political partaking, displacement and wondering are not merely luxuries we cannot afford (Sloterdijk, 2016), simply because we—and our desires—are caught up in the service of goods or of goodness (Lacan, 1997).

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