***Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, Volume 33 (2026), No. 1, pp. 41-57**

Holding the Tensions: Theorising Mediated Publicness in Curriculum-Making

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This paper poses the question of under what conditions curriculum-making becomes public. The existing literature theorises curriculum-making's publicness but in a way that leaves the concrete question as to how conditions and orientations for publicness converge unanswered. For instance, Hopmann and Westbury point to institutional underpinnings yet they still remain agnostic as to what orientates schools towards public rather than sectional purposes; Biesta, while recognising the tensions, doesn't provide an account of what institutional conditions would sustain it. In this paper, we propose the concept of mediated publicness: a precarious institutional mode of collective responsibility for basic education. The conditions for mediated publicness are made up of three components: withdrawal of resources from sectional circuits, structural responsibility grounded in intergenerational asymmetry, and professional mediation answerable to collective frameworks. Based on this account, publicness, following from Schleiermacherian dialectics, is shaped through antinomies that must be institutionally sustained rather than resolved. Finally, we draw on the Finnish case to show publicness emerging under a concrete conjuncture, and commodification dismantling it by collapsing said tensions rather than opposing publicness frontally.

Introduction

When curriculum gets commodified, never mind exported from one national context to another as a commodified product, a fundamental shift happens. The curriculum transforms from a public act, process, and document to a product that serves private interests. It may still carry many familiar elements: the same name, and much of the contents, but the process of commodification, and the shift from serving public to private interests, has transformed it to something unrecognisable. Or at least this is what we discovered on our past work on curriculum commodification and education export from Finland (Matson & Salokangas, 2025; Salokangas & Maglaperidze 2025). We realised that, in order to better understand what that curriculum transformation entails, we needed to take a few steps back and focus on how a public curriculum that may subsequently get commodified, is developed in the first place. In other words, and in the spirit of this special issue, we wanted to shine light on the conditions in which curriculum making becomes public.

Curriculum-making's publicness has been theorised in existing literature, but what remains little understood is how the mechanism and the orientation of publicness converge. Westbury (2008) and Hopmann (1999) show that curriculum-making works as a "tool for managing the political, professional, and public fields around schooling" (Westbury, 2008, p. 61)—however they remain agnostic as to what would orient this institutional work towards public rather than sectional purposes—those of the family, the state or the capital, for example. Biesta (2023) recognises the tension between the school as societal function and the school as time for formation; he argues that publicness lies in "the insistence of education itself" (p. 158) once freed from all agendas—but offers no account of the institutional conditions that would sustain this. What is missing in both instances is the theorisation of the material and structural conditions whereby curriculum-making sustains irreconcilable tensions that remain oriented towards the public rather than collapsing into sectional capture. In this paper we offer the concept of mediated publicness, which helps us name these conditions by outlining institutional arrangements through which competing claims on curriculum are held in tension rather than resolved.

We theorise how historical and institutional processes such as public resourcing, professional formation, and curriculum-making converge into what we term "mediated publicness." This represents an inherently precarious institutional mode of collective responsibility for basic education and pedagogy formed through the withdrawal of resources from sectional and private interests and redirected as shared responsibility, enacted through professional mediation and answerable to collective frameworks rather than sectional purposes. Thus, publicness will be defined through these two conditions: resourcing and responsibility. The aim is to show that curriculum-making's publicness is shaped through tensions and antinomies[1] whose internal balance, however precarious, influences its mediated public character. We don't see these tensions as dialectical contradictions to be resolved but as antinomies that must be institutionally sustained if curriculum-making is to remain public. Using this theory, we rely on the Finnish case study to demonstrate how publicness emerged under a concrete conjuncture and the ways in which commodification now systematically dismantles the institutional conditions that sustained it.

Curriculum and the Question of Publicness: A Genealogy

The question of what makes curriculum public has a longer genealogy than contemporary debates around public education would suggest, and tracing it reveals conditions that problematise participation-centred narratives. From a historical perspective, curriculum emerges when the question of what should be transmitted to the next generation becomes an explicit object of public deliberation. This is famously identified in Aristotle's (1905) *Politics* where he states that it's no longer clear "what should be the character of…public education and how young persons should be educated" (pp. 300–301). As Jaeger observed, "the historical process by which the world of culture is built up culminates when the ideal of culture is consciously formulated"—this is a moment when "the concept of *Paideia*" changes from the "the process of education" to include "the objective side, the content of *Paideia*" (1939/1976, p. 303). Mollenhauer (2013) recognises a further key change in this process: the emergence of representation (a symbolic representation of culture and the wider world) alongside presentation (direct encounter with adult life) as a model of educational transmission. With the appearance of print culture, the world to be communicated to the young increasingly exceeded what could be directly shown within lived, shared practices and experiences, and this necessitated newer forms of pedagogical mediation and selection. For

[1] Our use of "antinomy" follows Schleiermacher's dialectic approach and this differs from Hegelian dialectics in ways that are important for our work. Hegel's dialectic follows the self-movement of an idea through a contradiction and towards a sublation, whereas Schleiermacher's oscillates between opposites that approximates but never terminates into a higher unity (Friesen & Kenklies, 2023, pp. 107–209). This difference is key to understanding the pedagogical antinomies in this paper. We don't view them as incomplete dialectics awaiting resolution but generative tensions that underpin the condition of mediated publicness.

Mollenhauer these modes don't sequentially replace one another but co-exist: education continues through both immediate encounter with adult ways of life and their symbolic representation. Hamilton (1990) similarly argues that schooling is a "relatively recent invention" (p. xiv), the "domesticated offspring" of earlier education arrangements that became subject to explicit organisation.

Yet Hamilton suggests that this transformation was never truly a technical reaction to increasing social complexity. The debates that accompanied the institutionalisation of curriculum—for instance, whether teaching writing would "elevate children above their proper station in life" or if arithmetic should serve the "casting accounts" demanded by industrial management—paint a picture where curriculum-making is a space for contestation about such fundamental questions as social reproduction and transformation (Hamilton, 1990, pp. 34–35). Curriculum was mainly contested in terms of the needs as demanded by church, state, and capital rather than by open public debate. While these processes did address whole populations, matters concerning curriculum and schooling to a large extent were settled in spaces that were far removed from participatory public life (Hamilton, 2013).

Long before these attempts of institutionalisation, the intellectual case for universal education was already being made. Comenius in seventeenth century already argued for educating all people (*omnes*) in all things (*omnia*) and in all ways (*omnino*). Comenius in *Pampaedia* and the *Great Didactic* makes a case that if education is for all, decisions around what is to be taught, how it's to be represented and for what ends can no longer be left to custom, estate, or privilege. This was the vision set against the dominant interests of Church, political tyranny of the state, and the greed of the emerging capital (Sadler, 2013). Our concern isn't whether Comenius's pansophism was realised institutionally, but that curriculum's publicness was already being theorised as requiring sheltering from the very institutions—church, capital, state—that would dominate its institutionalisation. In a way, Comenius here anticipated an important element of mediated publicness, namely the need for education to be seen as a public responsibility since universal education demands mediation and justified selection as it exceeds the simple inheritance of tradition.

The historical perspective shows that curriculum's public qualities were influenced by changing relations between knowledge, society, and the individual. Schleiermacher (1826/2022) recognised this when he defined pedagogy as "a science [Wissenschaft] that is at once closely connected to ethics, and also derived from it as an applied field, and [one] that's coordinated with politics" (p. 28). His framework of four social spheres further specifies what we mean by publicness. Education, he states, "should deliver the individual as its 'work' to the communal life of the state and the church, to free, convivial social intercourse, and to [the community of] reflection and knowledge" (Schleiermacher, 1826/2023, p. 47). The point here isn't a participation in any single of these spheres but differentiated participation across all four—no single logic dominates over educational purposes. For example, the family sits within the social life sphere and has its own legitimate orientation towards the child. Nevertheless, its claim is still one among many. When any single sphere organises the whole, something of significance to education gets lost, namely dominant familial control diminishes the public spirit that larger community offers; exclusive state control destroys the moral ground of the family itself, etc. (Schleiermacher, 1957). He adds that contradictions between these spheres "arise from their own imperfections" and persist (Schleiermacher, 1826/2023, p. 48), which aren't resolved but held in tension.

Institutional Practices and Conditions Required for Mediated Publicness

Why Participation is Insufficient?

Still, what remains to be theorised in curriculum scholarship is how curriculum-making becomes public through specific historical and institutional practices. The fact that curriculum entails contested deliberations (Goodson, 1993; Hamilton, 1990), or operates through "multi-voiced conversations" (Doyle, 2017) or indeed through competing historical orientations (Deng, 2012; Deng & Luke, 2008)

doesn't automatically establish its public character—private negotiations can be equally contested, multi-voiced or embody different historical orientations. Further, when we critique participation as insufficient for publicness, we're addressing broader liberal emphases on voice, choice, and transparency as democracy guarantors.

Thus, curriculum-making publicness operates in ways that neither necessarily *consists in,* nor can be *exhausted by* direct public participation. Ian Hunter (1994) has argued in a different but related context that "the picture that emerges is…not one of the school's appearance as the partial manifestation of an underlying principle, but of its improvised assemblage as a device to meet the contingencies of a particular history" (p. xvii). In this sense, publicness shouldn't be seen as the realisation of a participatory principle, but as an institutional form which may, but needn't, take participatory expressions. For instance, when it comes to curriculum-making, Hopmann (1999) argues that it remains largely circumscribed from direct public participation, and that experts (curriculum counsellors, subject experts, etc.) act as an intermediary agency at the institutional level to "take into account the public discourse and its results as well as what they believe might work in schools" (p. 93). Mediated publicness actually shows how supposedly participatory democratic processes are always-already (pre-)mediated by professional logics that constrain what can be contested.

The Finnish context provides an example of this. The curriculum-making at policy level is structured to be participatory and inclusive, being open to actors from municipalities and trade unions and to citizens via open online platforms. Yet, despite the involvement of these actors their contributions continue to have negligible input in the curriculum reforms (Hakala & Kujala, 2021). For instance, during recent reforms, 60, 000 youth were consulted but their participation had next to no influence on curriculum-making. We don't view this lack of influence as an expression of democratic deficit or detrimental to publicness. We instead see participatory procedures as aggregative that introduce a category error: educational matters aren't distributive—e.g. whose preferences prevail—but formative. Education is concerned with what must be encountered regardless of preferences. If we let aggregation dominate, curriculum becomes responsive rather than responsible. Also, under conditions of structural asymmetry, appeals to participation generate forms of consent to decisions whose basic parameters aren't truly open to genuine contestation; in these instances, persuasion risks being secured through staging of agreement. Thus, unmediated participation risks the capture by particularised interests that can turn public goods into private advantage, or reduction to mere performance that legitimises pre-determined ends.

Two Conditions: Resourcing and Responsibility

In the face of this necessary breakage a fundamental question arises: if public participation is both solicited and systematically circumscribed within the curriculum-making, then where is the source of publicness? What is it that makes curriculum-making public, if at all? To answer, we need to go beyond participatory procedures and emphasise two factors: resourcing and responsibility. We understand public education as financed not simply with taxpayer money but with resources withdrawn from private interests and placed under collective responsibility. By withdrawal we mean the foreclosure of certain existing models for resources altogether, for example, resources as debt products, or market commodities (e.g., fee-based access, profit extraction, or competitive accumulation) or circuits through which families convert economic and other forms of capital into positional advantage. We don't see this is a displacement or redistribution of resources from private hands to public domain; we instead argue for the closure of the conversion mechanism itself.

In this sense, with these arrangements in place, education needn't become the downstream beneficiary to economic processes governed by their own logic. Thus, this isn't a withdrawal into education's separate sphere, but a refusal to grant the economic a separate sphere to begin with. Importantly, this withdrawal from private and sectional interest circuits creates a space dedicated to the

shared world rather than to advantage, whether economic or familial—not the elimination of private interests but the foreclosure of routes whereby they would dominate the educational field. The Finnish case provides concrete instances of withdrawal as negotiated foreclosure (Kauko, 2019). For instance, the 1968 Basic Education Act and its enactment (1972–1977) made teacher education the responsibility of universities with a mandatory master's degree; this effectively closed off private circuits of professional qualification and credentialling (Risku, 2014). When it comes to private grammar schools while they were legally accommodated, they were then absorbed fiscally as new legislation made running schools privately untenable (Kauko, 2019). The state committed to covering 81-90% of teacher remuneration and this saturated the cost structure of provision (Risku, 2014), which in its turn constrained the institutionalisation of competitive advantage.

But withdrawal alone establishes negative conditions—the foreclosure of sectional circuits. What gives this space its substantive orientation is responsibility, namely the structural obligation to mediate what will be transmitted across generations. Schleiermacher (1826/2022) identified this ground when he began from the formal structure of human life as generational, where older and younger co-exist with a significant portion of the activity of the older necessarily oriented towards the younger generation. Since this relation concerns obligations that can't be reduced to choice or contract, it's ethical before it's political. Importantly, transmission happens regardless—contingency, power or tradition—but without institutionally stabilised responsibility, it occurs degeneratively (Winkler, 2023). The more decisive this relation becomes for the continuation of communal life, the less it can be left to chance; it requires institutionally recognised and stabilised forms of practice and judgment of what gets transmitted.

This responsibility is grounded in three asymmetries—temporal, positional, and pedagogical. We see responsibility as a relation where the one who acts can't derive legitimation from the one on whose behalf they act. Other kinds of acting-for-another—authority, guardianship, administration—can be authorised through delegation, representation or contract. But in each of these asymmetries, it's children whose interests are concerned and who are structurally unable to authorise the action taken on their behalf. Temporally, the future generation can't consent to what's transmitted to them;[2] positionally, the child can't adjudicate between the competing claims of family, school and culture on their formation; pedagogically, the one being formed can't yet grasp the formative process as such (see Footnote 4). Further, this responsibility is most demanding where conditions make children and their proxies—families and communities—least able to make claims on what is transmitted to them, and where their realities are therefore most at risk of escaping the frameworks through which responsibility is exercised. We therefore see these asymmetries as the conditions under which educational action can only take the form of responsibility—since no other mode of legitimation can work where the one on whose behalf decisions are made is structurally unable to authorise them.

The temporal asymmetry finds its expression in a pedagogical antinomy when education is oriented towards the future, but the child initially lives in the present and can't consent to the future-oriented shaping. The ethical demand that arises here for pedagogy is to hold the two in a form of tension-filled, non-sacrificial unity. This framing is helpful for understanding what we mean by mediated publicness: an institutional form in which intergenerational obligation is protected from the contingencies of private power—a protection whose institutional form we elaborate below—and the arbitrariness of "chance" and "social time" (Masschelein, 2000) that would collapse this pedagogical tension that gives education its ethical force.

We see positional asymmetry as overlapping practices with different structural positionality towards the child. Parents operate from particularity (this child), while teachers, schools, etc. from universality (all children, the shared world). While of course there's overlap in terms of the interests (wellbeing, becoming proficient in maths, etc.) there are also conflicts between these two positions and

[2] Curriculum-making is itself anticipatory since it selects and sequences what can only become intelligible in retrospect. What Scheffler (1958) calls "controllable acts" need practical justification rather than logical proof. Such practical justifications remain provisional since decisions must be made before their consequences are known.

if either private (parental) or the school sphere's logic dominates the rules of these overlapping and disagreement processes, then the child loses the possibility of encountering something not already determined by their origin. Familial dominance means the child only meets what the family already values, and the curriculum becomes an extension of parental interest. State or market dominance means the child only encounters whatever serves systematic reproduction. In either case, what's lost is the encounter with alterity, or in other words, the possibility of encounter with knowledge, ideas, and demands that neither the family nor state would have consciously chosen for them. Markets fragment and atomise and weigh preferences by purchasing power itself grossly unevenly distributed—futures bought based on present advantage and "what should be taught to the next generation?" is answered by willingness to pay. Only a public framework sustained across generations can support this responsibility. Institutional curriculum-making represents the site where these irreconcilable claims converge precisely because no other site can hold them without resolving them in favour of one sphere.

Professional Mediation and What It Enables

While withdrawal creates the space, with responsibility it gains orientation. We see professional mediation as enacted by the asymmetries—since where the beneficiary can't consent and authorise, and where aggregation leads to the wrong kind of collectivity, we're left with professional judgment answerable to collective frameworks (in our case, the Finnish National Core Curriculum) rather than any principal who would directly mandate it. Since the National Core Curriculum (NCC) belongs to no particular sphere (cf. Hopmann, 1999; Sivesind & Westbury, 2016)—neither state nor profession nor family—this accountability is public in character.[3] Here, teachers are interpreters who must use their discretion to decide what of the curriculum's cultural content should be taught, how it should be represented, and towards what pedagogical purposes these are directed. We also qualify that this professional mediation doesn't amount to neutrality or immunity from social imperatives, but it presupposes the orientation we've just outlined.

What does this arrangement of withdrawn resources and collective responsibility enable? As Biesta (2023) demonstrates, the modern school exists within a structural tension: society has legitimate claims on education—demands for enculturation, social preparation, economic contribution—yet education must simultaneously maintain distance from these very demands. Following Levinson (2001), we reject any "naive cordoning off" (p. 201) that pretends education can exist in hermetic isolation. The wider world—with its prevailing political orthodoxies, economic imperatives, and cultural conflicts, technological innovations—will one way or another find ways to wriggle into curriculum and schooling (Higgins, 2010). What mediated publicness enables is neither transparency to societal demands nor isolation from them, but rather a third position: the public entrusts teachers with responsibility to mediate how the world gets in. This mediation creates what we might call pedagogical sanctuary—the space-time society gives itself to reflect on itself (Masschelein, 2000), space-time where students encounter the world at one remove, with time and protection to understand, interpret, and challenge collective knowledge. In this sanctuary, politics remains latently present but students encounter it as the subject of potentiality rather than as imperative demands requiring immediate commitment; the student here is no longer a primarily a child-of-this-family or bearer-of-this-background; and the teacher is no longer primarily a productive worker; and knowledge isn't primarily an instrument. Thus, publicness isn't only juridical or financial, but also experienced as a scholastic suspension of social roles, utilities, and destinies (Masschelein & Simons, 2013). While Masschelein and Simons (2013) theorise the internal conditions of

[3] We're not making the banal claim that teachers interpret, which they do, but that the legitimacy of their interpretation emanates from a framework not reducible to any single sphere/principal. For example, where judgment answers to the state, the capital, the family or *the school itself* (especially when institutional reputation or competitive advantage becomes the orienting logic), it starts to serve sectional interests. Only when it answers through a framework that belongs to none can judgment be oriented towards the public arrangement.

scholastic time, this paper attempts to focus on the *external* architecture that helps hold open the space within which suspension becomes possible.

In what follows, we take a closer look into how this theoretical edifice of mediated publicness finds its materialisation within the Finnish educational context. We begin by tracing the historical formation of institutional arrangements that enabled collective responsibility while maintaining the tension between societal claims and pedagogical distance. Through this approach we reveal how concrete material commitments and political settlements—rather than cultural essence or "Finnishness" (cf. the "Finnish miracle" discourse)—led to the conditions of public curriculum-making and how the accelerating commodification endangers to dismantle the structures that sustain this publicness.

A Paradigm of Mediated Publicness in Curriculum-Making: Finnish National System

Before exploring the historical narrative of the institutional emergence of Finnish education, we would like to frame the current curriculum-making system in Finland. Finland's education system has a tiered architecture. The Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) is responsible for the National Core Curriculum, which is a binding framework outlining nation-wide pedagogical values, aims, and subject-based content. Finland's 308 municipalities are responsible for local curriculum-making involving interpreting and enacting the NCC for their contexts (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2023). Principals and municipal education leaders (appointed civil servants responsible for education at local level) facilitate this local interpretation and teachers enact the curriculum with professional discretion. Approximately every ten years, the NCC is revised and updated involving the EDUFI and working groups of teachers, school principals, researchers, and others (Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2024; Soini et al., 2021). Finland has no school inspections, no standardised national testing, and no state-published school rankings—professional trust is the accountability mechanism rather than external control (Autio, 2021).

The Absence of Publicness

We believe that the Finnish public education system represents a compelling, albeit not necessarily unique, case of the concept of "mediated publicness." We also note an important insight in its historical emergence in this particular context: the system started to acquire elements of publicness not when it involved direct participation, but when it was restructured around collective responsibility and public resourcing. As will be seen, the early historical phases—church direct control, nation-building, post-Civil War ideological formation—entailed state coordination but lacked the dual framing (resourcing and responsibility) we have identified. We can argue that the public was subject to education.

The Finnish public education is a hard-won and perpetually contested synthesis of historical tensions. It emerges from a struggle between such competing discourses as spiritual unity and secular control, between centralised equity and localised agency, between Anglo-American tradition of positivist curriculum and German *Bildung* pedagogy, and between social-democratic collectivism and neoliberal individualism. These tensions emerged where the public's role was passive and obligated; the lineage of the public education emerging from the times when education was a function of the church to maintain spiritual unity with the "public" excluded from educational decisions (Risku, 2014). This was later supplanted by a system that could amount to a form of participatory subjection where the public essentially became coerced subjects into an education project led by the state-church tandem to turn the public into literate, yet acquiescent Lutherans for the sake of religious participation, national unity and state stability (Niemi & Sinnemäki, 2019; Salonen, 2019). As Simola (2014) observes, Finland's first compulsory school law of 1921 appeared much later in comparison to its Nordic neighbours, and even

then mainly took the role of moral consolidation. Up to the WWII, schooling "was principally legitimated by the needs of society, of the Nation, of the Fatherland," (p. 140) with the aim of cultivating faith, work and loyalty as "the solid ground" of the curriculum. In this respect, *kansakoulu* was positioned as an *apparatus of moral nation-building*, which was a form of schooling where the public was taught into existence as a disciplined collective.

This carried into the subsequent era of nation-building, a project spearheaded by the Imperial Alexander University (modern University of Helsinki) (Välimaa, 2021). During this period, despite the romantic portrayal of teachers as "candles of the nation" (Niemi & Sinnemäki, 2019, p.124), this era was marked by an equally romantic exclusion where public was deemed the blank slate upon which nation's elites would inscribe a new Finnish identity. As Simola and colleagues (2017) note, compulsory mass schooling in Finland was conceived as "an initiation rite of passage to a modern nation-state" (p. 70), where national belonging was the key qualification sought. The *kansakoulu* was an enculturation mechanism through which the imagined nation was enacted in everyday life—a process that Uljens and Nyman (2013) note built the nation "from the inside out" (p. 32). This was the moment when *Bildung* found its place as the moral and philosophical guiding principle for nation-building, it joined Lutheran moral cultivation with linguistic and social justice aspirations, which eventually laid the intellectual foundation of modern Finnish education.

In the early 20th century, we see the institutionalisation of compulsory education when the exclusionary edifice was changed into a system that universalised access to public education; nevertheless, it still retained explicit political aims, namely that after the 1918 Civil War the state would coordinate ideological formation through public schools by cultivating anti-socialist, nationalist ideology to ward off future political rifts (Välimaa, 2021). This top-down approach was incrementally displaced by a more profound democratic impulse (Autio, 2021). There was a post-bellum shift towards social justice and equity through centralised comprehensive schooling; indeed, this was the paradigm-shift when the parallel structure of private grammar schools was dismantled through a uniform, publicly supported and funded system. Through this system equity of access, a high baseline of quality education was achieved alongside with universality, consistency, and stated-guaranteed resourcing (Risku, 2014).

The material restructuring also played a major role. For example, between 1970-1985, public employment in education grew substantially and this entailed a vast reallocation of state resources (Risku, 2014; Simola et al, 2017). Teacher education was elevated to MA-level higher education and became entirely publicly funded; schools received equitable state funding and for-profit schools were prohibited; curriculum-making became a state resourced responsibility through EDUFI. This represented foreclosure of circuits serving elite privilege and advantage and redirecting of resources towards the institutional conditions for collective curriculum responsibility. We don't believe these arrangements resolved underlying tensions but held them in generative balance between state coordination and professional autonomy, between collective responsibility and individual formation. The viability of mediated publicness would depend on maintaining these tensions rather than collapsing them—this is why we view it as precarious and perpetually vulnerable to either market logic or technocratic solutionism and control.

The Nascent Publicness

Since 1980s however, there was a systemic and deliberate move towards decentralisation that effectively reconfigured the Finnish public education system to one of localised interpretation within a national framework (Mølstad, 2015). The national curriculum authority (now EDUFI), established in the 1991, issues the National Core Curriculum as a framework document and municipalities and schools then develop local curricula that interpret and specify this framework for their contexts. This meant that the state relinquished detailed input-output control—for example, abandoning school inspections, granting more pedagogical freedoms vis-a-vis the curriculum interpretation and enactment. This signaled a move from control to trust as the orienting force (Autio, 2021). However, the state retained core strategic

leverage over goals, funding principles, and empowering municipalities as primary actors (Mølstad, 2015). Thus, the curriculum was to be co-constructed by local actors within the guardrails to ward off inequity. Besides, since teachers are directly involved in curriculum-making at the municipal level (Salonen-Hakomäki et al., 2024; Soini et al., 2021; Sullanmaa et al., 2024) and are trusted as autonomous professionals, this placed them in a structurally open position. In this system a series of tension-filled relations interlink: the state sets the curriculum framework but doesn't prescribe or actively determine its enactment; teachers interpret but can't override collective purposes; municipalities localise within the national framework, etc. No particular actor dominates—publicness happens when the tension between these positions is sustained. While indeed there is ordering to this, it's incomplete by design as each level requires mediation it can't provide on its own. What generates responsibility is this mutual insufficiency that's oriented towards the child's formation rather than any particular actor's self-reproduction.

Furthermore, in terms of educational sciences and teacher education—and in contrast to other Nordic countries like Norway and Sweden that were more oriented towards the U.S.A.—Finland developed a unique hybrid. Since the 19th century, Finland has been profoundly indebted to the German *Bildung* and *Didaktik* tradition but since the turn of the 20th century it has also mediated Anglo-American empirical and pragmatic approaches (Saari et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it never entirely lost its Germanic foundational ethos (Autio, 2021; Kansanen & Uljens, 1997; Saari et al, 2017; Uljens & Nyman, 2013). However, this Germanic ethos, according to Horlacher (2015), prioritised "what goes on in the inner realm of the soul" (p. ix) while it consciously excluded such factors as the realms of "usefulness, trade, and economy" (p. 56)—what Mollenhauer (1977) would also identify in *Bildung* as systemic separation of the education and upbringing process from material social relations. This insularity—i.e. political quietism and withdrawal from worldly concerns—initially conceived as a means of cultivating a distinct culture was in the Finnish adaptation pragmatically configured with *Bildung's* intellectual and moral growth to incorporate material well-being and social justice (Saari et al., 2017). This configuration didn't dissolve Bildung's focus on self-determination but placed it into welfare state arrangements that supplied material and social orientation that Bildung alone couldn't provide. It's been argued that this hybrid that's focused on both formation and social justice, is what shields the Finnish education from total subordination to standardisation and commodification (Autio, 2021).

In this model, teacher autonomy is understood as the professional practice involving interpreting the curriculum to discern its pedagogical substance and ethical implications, thereby facilitating what Stojanov (2012) refers to as "world-encountering"—a process whereby students' self-formation meets with trans-contextual ideas and reasoning. The teacher's key role is to mediate between the student and the cultural content ("the world") (Künzli & Horton-Krüger, 2000). This model, rooted in decades of German-influenced didaktik tradition, was operationalised during the 1970s comprehensive school reform, which reinforced the curriculum as a framework for the professional discretion rather than prescriptive mandate (Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Kansanen & Uljens, 1997; Maaranen & Afdal, 2024).

The German-Finnish synthesis that we address in this paper operates within a tension-filled relation, with Bildung concerned with self-determination withdrawn from external control, and pedagogy as an asymmetrical relation[4] where teachers act on behalf of the child—a pedagogical relation that is structurally in tension with the autonomy it seeks to support. The Finnish practice we witnessed a sustained holding of this tension—a pedagogy orientated towards Bildung yet without claiming to secure it.

[4] Pedagogy involves an asymmetrical relation. As Friesen and Kenklies (2023) observe, "the educator is there for the … child in a way that the child is simply not for the educator" (p. 5). This asymmetry is *sui generis*—what Spiecker (1984) describes as one-sided "envelopment," where the adult experiences the child's formation, but the child cannot yet experience the education as such. The adult is positioned on both ends of the shared situation while the child occupies only one. This is Kant's antinomy where education must lead the child towards autonomous self-determination, yet this can only be done through constraints the child cannot yet authorise.

This teacher autonomy, thus has existed within structural constraints orientated towards collective rather than sectional interests. The institutional framework that was already established—MA-level teacher education, teacher discretion in curriculum-making at municipal level (Soini et al., 2021), national core curriculum framework requiring teacher interpretation, and also the abolition of school inspections in 1990s—placed teachers in a position not to work in the interests of consumer preferences but to mediate the curriculum-making process, what knowledge should be shared, interrupted, and challenged. The Finnish system did not resolve the Bildung-pedagogy tension but built the institutional arrangements for its continuous re-enactment. Herein lies this key distinction—market-orientated autonomy structurally serves consumer satisfaction, while professional autonomy within mediated publicness is structurally bounded to serve collective purposes through withdrawn resources and national frameworks. Thus, this teacher autonomy was framed in a way that they could not work towards for-profit arrangements, they could not just "deliver" or "implement" the national curriculum without their collective judgment, and of course could not turn away students based on economic capital.

We see this evidence of structural orientation in teachers' collective opposition to privatisation (Nivanaho et al., 2024) and their "critical conservatism" (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021). While we cannot directly observe teacher motivations, the patterns identified above are consistent with professional practice shaped through collective rather than market accountability. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that even these structural constraints cannot safeguard collective responsibility as professional practice can easily drift towards technocratic legitimation or disciplinary isolationism even within such public frameworks.

Three conditions have emerged from these contested settlements—a philosophical orientation (Bildung/social justice), a steering framework (the framework curriculum – NCC), and a professional practice (teacher mediation within structural constraints). In the next section, we'll develop a framework that brings these conditions together, forming a shield that makes mediated publicness possible—and that commodification systematically targets.

A Threefold Shield Against Commodification

The following three elements demonstrate the Finnish institutionalisation of the two conditions addressed above, namely resourcing and responsibility. The three elements are as follows: a political and financial commitment to withdrawing resources from sectional interests and placing them under collective responsibility for social justice and equity; a steering framework (the NCC) that transposes collective societal purposes into a framework not reducible to any single sphere; and the empowerment of the teaching profession rooted in the Bildung tradition that acts as a trusted mediator between the child, and the wider public ("the world"), pedagogical judgments accountable to the framework's collective purposes. Made up of these three elements, this shield sustains the conditions under which the question—what must we preserve and transform for the new generation?—can be addressed through professional mediation rather than market mechanisms.

This shielding isn't without its own tensions and exigencies, however. For example, while it provides a relative protection against the external market imperatives, it at the same time makes a weighty demand from parents and students themselves, namely it calls on them to participate increasingly not as consumers but citizens-in-formation. It transforms schooling from state service to a logic where the school not only exists for the child and parents, but where the child and parents also exist for the school.

And finally, we would like to point out that the Finnish curriculum's publicness isn't its essential "Finnishness," it's rather its process of becoming-public—the historical struggles, the political negotiations, the material commitment, the trust-based professional mediation that engages the question of what must be preserved and transformed for the next generation. As Autio (2021) reminds us, the social trust that persists to this day in Finnish education is transient and permanently vulnerable to the mercantile, psychologised logic that commodification imposes. In the Finnish context we observe the

foundational elements that make up for the Finnish curriculum's public character and by implication its education system overall. These are that make up for Finnish curriculum's non-commodifiable and non-exportable qualities. As we demonstrate next, each element of this shield contains internal vulnerabilities that commodification systematically exploits and undermines.

Threats to Mediated Publicness

Now, we take a closer look at processes of commodification in relation to each element of the shield, and how tensions within them get resolved. We start with Bildung's antinomy between self-determination and formative constraint, and then proceed to NCC's antinomy between framework steering and local interpretation, and finally we touch upon teaching profession's antinomy between collective accountability and pedagogical discretion—each of these are hold open under conditions of mediated publicness. We demonstrate how commodification pushes each in a specific direction that forecloses the tensions necessary for mediated publicness: towards performance, parental preferences, and implementation.

Some twenty years ago, Autio (2006a) observed how the economist bias in the Finnish education discourse restricted the scope of conceiving education in its genuine complexity. Economics disguised as politics became a powerful way of infiltrating public education, embedding the rationalism of performance and metrics into educational discourse "with its accompanying preferences for the formation and regulation of subjectivities" (p. 69). Autio (2006b) that same year claimed that the financial and material guarantee to sustain *Bildung* in educational policy was "no longer self-evident" (p. xii). However, if we take a more global look beyond the Finnish context, we indeed observe Bildung's decline alongside its grand, totalising meta-narratives that promised universal human emancipation through education. This decline has coincided with the ascent of PISA narratives that interestingly reinforced nation-state competition under the aegis of globalisation's denationalising logic (Roselius & Meyer, 2018). As the German context itself attests, the concept of Bildung has been colonised from within by "the Anglo-American literacy concept" (Roselius & Meyer, 2018, p. 13). Already in the 1970s, the German educator and politician Heinz-Joachim Heydorn (1970) was implicating *Bildung* in a process of intensifying economisation and reification. He saw this largely a consequence of expanding institutionalisation that led to *Bildung* being identified with specific governmental interests, thereby causing the loss of its original emancipatory character.

This is profoundly ironic. The very asymmetry that we mentioned exists between Bildung and pedagogy—the authority of teacher to guide the student—also contained its vulnerability. So long as that authority was embedded within Bildung's horizon of self-determination, the tension remained generative. However, asymmetry without this tension becomes hierarchy, available for capture by whatever authority —market, technocracy, nation-state—claims the right to define the principles. Uljens and Nyman (2013) point this out when they note "the nation was built by Bildung" (p. 35): the same structure that could be relied upon for nation-building, and later for competency/skills production. This means that Bildung lacked a built-in mechanism to defend itself against external powers and authorities that be. Once the authority of the nation-state waned, it was left exposed, now compelled to justify its relevance under those exact terms it had historically rejected—"usefulness, trade, economy" (Horlacher, 2015, p. 56). As concerns the Finnish context, we're witnessing the inversion of *Bildung's* logic and purposes. Based on Hakala et al. (2015), it becomes clear that ideas such as creativity, holistic development, and innovation have occupied the space once held by *Bildung's* humanistic aspirations. The tension we mentioned earlier between self-determination and formative constraint gets resolved in favour of demonstrable outputs, which also pre-interprets the curriculum towards performance before the teacher reads it. Transversal competencies that were introduced in the 2014 NCC demonstrates this inversion explicitly.

One expression of this vulnerability is visible in the introduction of what Hakala and Kujala (2021) call "transversal competencies" and "multidisciplinary learning modules" in Finland's 2014 NCC. This reflects wider Europeanisation trends promoted by the E.U.'s eight key competencies (Council of the European Union, 2018). These competency frameworks, in themselves, respond to legitimate demands: preparing students for participation across multiple social domains and facing up to futures that can't be specified in advance. The problem emerges not from competencies *as such*, but from how they are decoupled from Bildung's conditional dimension. When transversal competencies replace rather than complement encounters with disciplinary depth and cultural content, self-formation gets reduced to transferable skills, and the question of "*who one is becoming*" collapses into "*what one can do and accomplish*." When multidisciplinary modules prioritise demonstration of cross-curricular transfer over intellectual synthesis, education is en-route to abandon its role as a space for ethical interpretation and judgment.

The teacher autonomy in the Finnish context is not celebrated as an isolated privilege, but it's an expression of a very specific, hard-won tension: teachers' substantive discretion (freedom to interpret and enact the NCC) is framed by a structural orientation towards collective responsibility (demonstrated in their "critical conservatism" (Wermke & Salokangas, 2021) and their voiced opposition to privatisation). However, Nivanaho and Thrupp (2023) demonstrate how the Finnish teachers' union, The Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ), has made only limited attempts to oppose neoliberal reforms, often adopting a collaborative stance rather than directly contesting policy-making. A weakly organised resistance to reforms—combined with short-term, project-based initiatives (Kalalahti & Varjo, 2023), education budget cuts (Hidayat & Suoranta, 2022), heavy bureaucracy, and the increasing commercialisation and commodification of comprehensive schooling (Nivanaho et al., 2024)—have weakened teachers' conditions to exercise critical conservatism. For instance, we refer to two interlinked processes in this regard: the entry of private edu-businesses into curriculum materials, assessment mechanisms, and digital platforms (Seppänen et al., 2023)—where the formal curriculum is public but its enactment is shaped by what can be tracked and scaled—school choice that exacerbates the struggle for positional goods through the introduction of reputational hierarchies, parental strategies seeking distinction, and the commodification of schools as differentiated choices even though no fees are paid (Kosunen et al., 2020). School choice reorients pedagogical judgment towards catering to parental particularities and competitive positioning, edu-businesses pre-interpret the curriculum, resolving the tension between collective responsibility and teacher discretion in favour of implementation and market responsiveness. Besides, from the perspective of suspension mentioned earlier, school choice appears as the systemic refusal of separation: the family follows the child into the school, thus the school loses its ability to bracket social origin, parental projection, and inherited destiny.

Final Thoughts

Mediated publicness is an analytical concept, and as such, it points to conditions; it's not an inviolable essence. It can be captured by markets, technocrats or sectional interests, but this capture is the point where it ceases to be.

But what actually kept the tensions open in the Finnish case and why is this holding now giving way? We saw that the elements necessary for sustaining mediated publicness were simultaneously attacked; and the fact that they're now failing would suggest that they were mutually reinforcing. But the sequence also matters: if the philosophical orientation is undermined, professional mediation survives but loses orientational purpose—autonomy without Bildung is just technocratic discretion. Where institutional arrangements are hollowed out, the orientation becomes rhetoric without material support —after all, Bildung without material grounding is nothing more than aspiration. Bildung told us something crucial about education "which must not be allowed to be lost if human existence is to preserve its humane character: the self-determination of the person, withdrawn from all planning and controllability" (Böhm & Seichter, 2022, p. 74); the institutions provided the structural space and

professional discretion enacted both in practice. Since the most effective way to undermine mediated publicness is through attacking all of the elements simultaneously, the piecemeal defence—defending teacher autonomy without the philosophical orientation that would give it its purpose, or redistributing resources without foreclosing sectional circuits—is inadequate.

Professional mediation can also tip the balance towards technocracy if it abandons responsibility towards those who can neither be present nor grant consent—the children, the future-generations. This kind of operational closure would only work in the interests of who administer it. Thus, the mediation we've outlined works on behalf of those who aren't structurally present, and crucially, it holds open the question "what education is for," rather than pre-empting it. The moment it starts serving professional territory, administrative efficiency, or market positioning, it ceases to be public.

Another tendency that we saw to threaten the health of the shield is the fact the material foundation of publicness—resources withdrawn from private circuits—is being re-infused with a market logic even when remaining publicly funded. But this reality brings to the fore in a startling manner the utter significance of the political struggle over the very *purpose* of these material resources even if the funding for education in general were to increase. We think that the decisive political battle is no longer just for public funding per se, but for the de-commodification of public funds themselves. The Finnish case is illustrative in this sense as we (Matson & Salokangas, 2025) demonstrate: publicly funded institutional forms fuel edu-businesses that turn the curriculum into exportable commodities. Thus, funds remain public but their purposes are commercialised.

While the institutional arrangements we have described are Finnish, the antinomy principle isn't —any curriculum-making that claims publicness must first recognise and institutionalise non-resolution. Ultimately, the process of commodification we have traced represents more than the erosion of specific structures; it is the collapse of a fundamental relationship that defines public education. A healthy public system sustains the productive tension that the school exists for the child and parents, and that the child and parents also exist for the school—the latter meaning they are called into a public world that predates and will outlive them. The concept of mediated publicness that we have developed in this paper identifies and *names* the Finnish comprehensive education that sustained this delicate tension. Its disappearance could signal the collapse of the very time in which education could still be public, and with it, the disappearance of the space where the child might develop a relation to the world not wholly predetermined by parental projections.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the two blind-reviewers and Norm Friesen for their very helpful comments on this paper. The authors are also grateful for comments and feedback provided by colleagues at the EduKnow research group at Tampere University, in particular Iida Kiesi, Kimmo Kuortti, Jaako Kauko, Oshie Nishimura-Sahi, Nelli Piattoeva, Joni Forsell, and Vera G Centeno, as well as colleagues at the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, Friday Seminar.

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