

# *Reclaiming Publicness of Education: Introduction*

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In March 2025, a group of colleagues proposed a symposium concerned with the question of how publicness of education could be reclaimed. That symposium was held at the Nordic Education Research Association (NERA) conference at the University of Helsinki. The symposium continued a series of formal and informal conversations and intellectual work carried out by the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy at Maynooth University starting in 2017. The symposium included four original contributions and two discussion papers drawing on education systems as varied as Ireland, Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, and the United States.

With good intentions we named the symposium “Reclaiming Publicness of Education.” The academic community continues to raise concerns about how public education, in various, even seemingly democratic contexts, around the world, is under threat from the corrosive effects of neoliberal education policy and resulting intensified marketisation, commercialisation, and commodification. Furthermore, the rise of populist and authoritarian voices and agendas poses direct threats to democracy, publicness, and education. For the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, publicness is not to be understood as a steady state of affairs, but rather a quality of togetherness that requires appropriate conditions and constant care to survive and thrive, like a sensitive plant. To stay with the analogy, publicness can wither down slowly, or collapse overnight, depending on the nature of hostile forces imposed upon it. Achieving conditions in which publicness can thrive can be demanding, as Rüsselbæk Hansen argues in this issue, as it requires listening and genuine engagement with dissident voices, and sitting with the discomfort such engagement brings. Discomfort then serves as the very soil of publicness.

The intention to reclaim something indicates a desire to bring or to take something back. Hence, in order to reclaim the publicness of education, a past version which could be reclaimed should have existed. In our efforts to reclaim, we were conscious to steer clear of empty sentimentalism and nostalgia: the pitfalls of making things great again. Additionally, we recognise that a special issue needs to do something more than simply name threats to publicness and describe its downfall, which extant literature already succeeds at. Instead, we wanted to shine light on the places and potentialities where publicness might thrive.

This special issue mimics the original symposium with contributions from symposium presenters Gert Biesta, Carl Anders Säfström, Joe Oyler, Nikoloz Maglaperidze, and Maija Salokangas. An additional contribution by Tony Carusi is included in this special issue and Dion Rüsselbæk Hansen offers a discussion on the topic.

In his essay, Biesta argues convincingly for a meaningful balance between the school as a function and the school as an institution in order for the school to be—and remain—a public good. This is particularly pertinent in our time, where functional understanding of the school has become increasingly hegemonic. Biesta suggests that only in a school institution that takes seriously its task to care and protect, rather than perform, it is possible for the new generation to exist as subjects of their own life.

In “Education Is for the People, Not the State: Moving Beyond the Public/Private Distinction,” Säfström gives some examples that, together, make the common distinction between public and private education somewhat problematic and suggest that we instead focus on and ask questions that move us beyond public versus private education, two sides of the same coin. Instead of public education, Säfström explores what the shift to *publicness of education* implies and traces its line of thought to the Sophists’ understanding of education and democracy.

Seeking to shine a light in a place where publicness is seldom sought, Oyler argues for an understanding of publicness as an internal phenomenon reflected in the relationship one might have to their self. He draws upon critiques of the individualist and rational “self” levied by de-colonial and feminist thinkers to frame such conceptions as explanatorily weak and complicitly discriminatory. He then draws on those same traditions to explore a relationally constituted and pluralist conception of self that he argues aligns more respectfully with the experience of selves in contemporary society. Adopting a historically cumulative conception of a self as a network of “I” perspectives allows Joe to argue that bringing these perspectives into internal relation helps create the conditions for freedom to occur (publicness) *within us*. He closes his argument by suggesting possible educational strategies for curating such relations.

In their examination of curriculum-making, Maglaperidze and Salokangas theorise how historical and institutional processes converge into what they call mediated publicness. They demonstrate that curriculum-making’s publicness is shaped through tensions and antinomies whose internal balance, however precarious, influences its mediated public character. Using the Finnish curriculum as an example, they argue that tensions in and of themselves are not a threat to publicness, but rather, when kept in generative balance, tensions make publicness possible.

In his article, Carusi suggests a shift from Hannah Arendt’s understanding of publicness to that of Jürgen Habermas’s when considering the neoliberal education policy and reform agendas shaping public education. He argues that Habermas’s dissertation provides a heuristic that establishes a dialectical model of the public which emphasises the conflicts and tensions from which a public emerges, rather than the Arendtian narrative of decline into which the public falls.

Finally, Rüsselbæk Hansen offers a commentary on the symposium papers presented in the Nordic Education Research Association conference in 2025 and articles featured in this special issue. In the commentary, he points to the importance of embracing pluralistic, democratic struggles, including experiences of non-belonging, lack and absence in order to foster education where ethical political partaking becomes possible.

## About the Authors

Maija Salokangas is an associate professor at Maynooth University and a co-director of the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy. Maija’s recent work on international education and education export focuses on the effects of globalisation, privatisation, and commodification of education in varied local contexts. Her two books *The Autonomy Paradox* (2021) and *Inside the Autonomous School* (2017) explore how

teachers navigate varied pressures, including marketisation of education and erosion of publicness, in their professional lives.

Joe Oyer is an assistant professor and co-director of the Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy at Maynooth University. His theoretical and empirical research explores how dialogue and philosophy—in their various forms—can support a quality of publicness in educational relationships. Some of these ideas and interests are reflected in his chapter *'Publicness' in Pedagogical Thinking* (2023) and a co-authored article, *From the Margins to the Center: The Transformative Promise of Philosophy for Children* (2026).

Carl Anders Säfström is a professor emeritus at the Department of Education/Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, Maynooth University, which he founded in 2017, and served as director until 2025. He is also one of the founding members of the Think-tank *Arete* (2026) supporting democratic popular education. His latest books include *Education for Everyday Life. Teaching as a Sophisticated Practice* (2023), and co-edited *The New Publicness of Education: Democratic Possibilities After the Critique of Neo-liberalism* (2023) and *Events of Art and Education in Post-climate Times* (2025).