

Pluralist publics in market driven education: towards more democracy in educational reform

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Pluralist Publics in Market Driven Education: Towards More Democracy in Educational Reform
RUTH BOYASK, 2020
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The struggle between public and private interests in education is a familiar theme to those grappling to understand and work within increasingly marketised education systems. Boyask's book invites readers to explore the complexity in this entanglement between state and market through a thought-provoking philosophical and empirical examination of the notion of 'the public' as conditional, unbounded, and pluralist. Building on Deweyan conceptions of democracy and education, Boyask looks within and beyond state and private education to consider what can be learned from a more nuanced conceptualisation of public education. In doing so, she opens up an important conversation about the potential for, and scrutiny of, democratic education in a range of contexts.

This book can be considered as two halves, with chapters 1-4 providing multiple ways of problematising commonly understood notions of public education, and chapters 5-7 exploring relevant concepts of 'public' in educational entities in England. Examples of policy and practices are included throughout, and a range of theoretical perspectives are weaved into major empirical examples, making the book a blend of the philosophical and empirical. The content is wide ranging, exploring notions of the public and private in: academisation; private school charitable status; co-operative schooling; local authority traded services; school choice; and ethical values for public life in higher education. This breadth builds a compelling argument for the reconsideration of the public in education and is one of the book's strengths, though readers hoping for a more specifically-located examination of the public or a particular methodological approach may find this less satisfying. Boyask uses the idea of 'policy-in-use' to explore intended and actual policy whilst also seeking to find broader truths within

the specific examples this book provides. Consequently, this book has relevance to varied audiences interested in philosophies of education, policy enactment, and marketisation in education.

Chapter 1 offers a challenge to ‘common-sense’ conceptions of public education and outlines the limitations of equating ‘public’ with the state and ‘private’ with the market. Here, drawing on Nancy Fraser’s reconceptualisation of the public sphere, Boyask sketches out her alternative and nuanced conceptualisation of conditional and pluralist publics in education. In chapter 2, this is developed further by focusing on contemporary Deweyan scholarship to reconsider the concept of the public in public education and where this may be consistent (or not) with Dewey’s democratic ideals. Chapter 3 problematises the public/private divide to explore how private and privatised entities in education intersect with public interests. Chapter 4 deals with entities attempting to balance public and private interests, such as public-private partnerships (PPPs), social enterprises, and co-operatives. Together, these chapters serve to build up a picture of the blurred conceptions of public and private in education policy and practice whilst also offering new ways to conceive of the public consistent with ideals of democratic education and pluralist publics.

Chapters 5-7 draw on examples from research in England, exploring the concepts of public benefit, public accountability, and public service. These chapters offer detailed and reflective accounts of empirical research, which draw on varied and pragmatically determined methods and theoretical frameworks. Chapter 8 concludes with three principles to underpin future discussion and recomposition of public education. These propose that through a pluralist, unbounded conception of public education and by paying attention to the relations within and between publics, we might find a way forward to build on struggles to preserve democratic values in education. However, there are no easy answers here. Boyask’s explorations of the public in public education are an invitation to complexity and nuance, as well as to further debate and to resistance in context.

For those aware of Boyask's work, some of the arguments and the research discussed in the book will be familiar. Although each chapter deals with a different aspect of publicness, there is necessarily some repetition of conceptualisations and recasting of these for new contexts. As a book, it is best read as a whole to make the most of the insights that Boyask's approach offers.

In a context of polarising debates about public and private education, this book attempts to unsettle some of these divides in ways that can be challenging, regardless of your position. Although Boyask describes her reading of some of the education entities examined as 'sympathetic', highlighting their public rather than private characteristics, she does not shy away from critique or discussing the limitations of their publicness. Instead, a reading of their publicness enables a critical view of the systems they inhabit and a meaningful examination of policy enactment in complex contexts.

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