

FRIENDSHIP AND THE PUBLIC STAGE: REVISITING HANNAH
ARENDT'S RESISTANCE TO "POLITICAL EDUCATION"

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ABSTRACT. Hannah Arendt's essays about the 1957 crisis over efforts of a group of youth, the "Little Rock Nine," to desegregate a high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, reveal a tension in her vision of the "public." In this article Aaron Schutz and Marie Sandy look closely at the experiences of the youth desegregating the school, especially those of Elizabeth Eckford, drawing upon them to trace a continuum of forms of public engagement in Arendt's work. This ranges from arenas of "deliberative friendship," where unique individuals collaborate on common efforts, to a more conflictual "public stage," where groups act in solidarity to change aspects of the public world. While Arendt famously asserted in her essay "The Crisis in Education" that political capacities should not be taught in schools, it makes more sense to see this argument as focused on what she sometimes called the conflictual "public stage," reflecting the experience of the Little Rock Nine. In contrast, Schutz and Sandy argue that Arendt's own work implies that "deliberative friendship," as described in her essay "Philosophy and Politics" and elsewhere, should be part of everyday practices in classrooms and schools.

Ever since Maxine Greene focused on Hannah Arendt in her presidential speech on "Public Education and the Public Space" at the 1982 conference of the American Educational Research Association,¹ a range of education scholars have explored the relationship between Arendt's concept of the "the public" and educational settings.² Mostly unacknowledged in these writings, however, is the fact that Arendt herself indicated that the public — for her, the realm of the "political" — should actually be excluded from schools and classrooms.³ Arendt stated that "education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have

1. Maxine Greene, "Public Education and the Public Space," *Educational Researcher* 11, no. 6 (1982): 4–7.

2. See especially the recent symposium, Chris Higgins, ed., "Education, Crisis, and the Human Condition: Arendt after 50 Years," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010); and Mordechai Gordon, ed., *Hannah Arendt and Education: Renewing Our Common World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001); as well as many articles by Gert Biesta, Michael Fielding, Natasha Levinson, Aaron Schutz, Terri Wilson, and others.

3. The key exception is a dialogue over two years between Aaron Schutz and Natasha Levinson at the 2000 and 2001 annual conferences of the Philosophy of Education Society. See Aaron Schutz, "Is Political Education an Oxymoron?" and Natasha Levinson, "Hannah Arendt on the Relationship Between Education and Political Action," both in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002); see also Natasha Levinson, "'But Some People Will Not': Arendtian Interventions in Education," and Aaron Schutz, "Stories vs. Practices," both in *Philosophy of Education 2002*, ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002). In addition, see Chris Higgins's discussion of related issues in "Human Conditions for Teaching: The Place of Pedagogy in Arendt's *Vita Activa*," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 407–445; and Gert Biesta, "How to Exist Politically and Learn from It: Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Education," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 556–575.

to deal with those who are already educated."⁴ Classrooms, she argued, should be spaces where the authority of adults is used to prepare children for entry into the public realm, but they should not be public spaces themselves. Children, she said, are simply not ready to take on the role of public citizens. In fact, when "emancipated from the authority of adults, the child has not been freed but has been subjected to a much more terrifying and truly tyrannical authority, the tyranny of the majority."⁵

In schools, she believed, the job of adults is to accept authority over children, introducing them to the world of history and objects into which they have been born and preparing them for the time when they can act politically to move this world forward into an unknown future. Education in this vision is fundamentally conservative — providing an introduction to the past and the present without thereby telling children what the world of tomorrow "must" be. This preserves the old as well as the potential for the new that children represent. Schools, Arendt argued, provide a safe place, hidden from the blinding light of the "public," where children can develop their own unique perspectives and gain knowledge of this world that they will inherit. Schools become "an institution that we interpose *between* the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world possible at all."⁶

Some scholars — including one of this essay's coauthors, Aaron Schutz — have argued that Arendt's position makes little sense, maintaining that if students are to participate in the public realm, then they need an education that prepares them for such participation.⁷ Arendt's vision of public citizenship as something that simply emerges "spontaneously," without any need for preparation, seems untenable. Here we go beyond Schutz's assertion and attempt to understand *why* the argument that "political education" is an "oxymoron" made sense to Arendt when she made it, and what resources exist within her writings to think beyond standard understandings of her vision of public citizenship.

4. Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1968), 177.

5. *Ibid.*, 181.

6. *Ibid.*, 188–189 (emphasis added).

7. Schutz, "Is Political Education an Oxymoron?"

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Arendt argued that “fundamental and flagrant contradictions rarely occur in second-rate writers,” but that “in the work of the great authors, they lead into the very center of their work.”⁸ With others, we believe the same could be said of Arendt.⁹ While the tone of her writing tended to indicate that the distinctions she established (between public and private, between work and labor, and so on) represented relatively stable aspects of our human world, she also emphasized that “everything I did and everything I wrote — all that is tentative,”¹⁰ and specified that much of her writing represented “exercises” or experiments.¹¹ And there was always slippage, however much she tried to prevent it, across her different discussions and across her experiments in thinking. Perhaps most importantly, she clearly stated that school is an odd kind of “in-between” space, a liminal space in her array of categorical spaces. She acknowledged it is a space that doesn’t quite “fit” her categories well even before we looked closer at how her discussion there complicates her broader visions of public action.

In this essay, we contend that Arendt’s tension-filled argument about the dangers of “political education” reveals key tensions in her assertions about public action and, further, that these have important implications for understanding the relationship of her work to education more broadly.

“THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION”

Arendt’s statement about the “nonpublic” nature of education appears just once, in her only essay that is primarily about education: “The Crisis in Education.” Before moving forward with our analysis, it is important to understand better the experience out of which that essay emerged, since Arendt maintained that political arguments inevitably emerge out of real experiences in the world.

As Jean Elshtain has shown, “Crisis” was drafted in response to the reception of an earlier Arendt essay, “Reflections on Little Rock,” written after viewing the brutality experienced by black children attempting to desegregate Southern schools during the civil rights movement.¹² “Little Rock” was actually written

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 105. This work will be cited in the text as *HC* for all subsequent references.

9. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996); and Aaron Schutz, “Theory as Performative Pedagogy: Three Masks of Hannah Arendt,” *Educational Theory* 51, no. 2 (2001): 127–150.

10. Hannah Arendt, “On Hannah Arendt,” in *Hannah Arendt: The Recovery of the Public World*, ed. Melvyn Hill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 338. Moreover, Arendt challenged her audience and students to think for themselves, stating that the “road of the theoretician who tells his students what to think and how to act ... My God! These are adults! We are not in the nursery! ... I wouldn’t instruct you ... and I would think this would be presumptuous of me” (310).

11. The subtitle of *Between Past and Future* is “Eight Exercises in Political Thought” (emphasis added), and Arendt indicated that much of her writing there (and by association elsewhere) was experimental.

12. Hannah Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” *Dissent* 6, no. 1 (1959): 45–56.

before "Crisis," even though "Crisis" was published first (in 1958), because the publication of "Little Rock" was delayed for a year as a result of its controversial content. Thus "Crisis" actually represented "a response to the criticisms" Arendt received about the earlier essay.¹³

In "Little Rock," Arendt argued, in part, that placing children on the front line of desegregating schools in the South represented, to use Elshtain's words, a "premature or forced politicization of children." Elshtain maintains further that, for Arendt, such overt, "explicit political mobilization of the young eviscerates authentic politics, or the possibility of such."¹⁴ Unprepared to make political decisions for themselves, children can become indoctrinated the way that Arendt had seen in Nazi Germany with the brainwashing of the Hitler Youth, thus losing their ability to bring their own unique perspectives to the world in adulthood. In this way, children could lose their capacity for participating as unique actors in a collective public space.

It is from the perspective of this earlier essay, then, that Arendt wrote in "Crisis" that "the child requires special protection and care so that nothing destructive may happen to him from the world."¹⁵ "Crisis" was written in defense of her response to *this particular* historical moment in Little Rock, Arkansas, when small children were being escorted by troops through mobs of angry, screaming whites. It is from *this* perspective that she railed against "the merciless glare of the public realm, which floods everything in the private lives of those concerned, so that children no longer have a place of security where they can grow."¹⁶

If we pull back from the intensity of that moment, however, and look in more nuanced ways at the transitional, "in-between" space of schooling, as Arendt described it, we believe the story of the public in "Crisis" becomes more complicated, revealing tensions in her very idea of the "public" itself.

THE STANDARD VIEW OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN ARENDT

In addition to being familiar with the context in which Arendt wrote "Crisis," it is important to understand what Arendt generally meant by "public" engagement before proceeding with our analysis. Most scholars look, with good reason, to her most famous work on political theory, *The Human Condition*, which was published contemporaneously with the essays of interest here; it is also true, though, that much the same vision can be drawn from *On Revolution* and other writings.¹⁷

13. Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Political Children," in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Bonnie Honig (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 267–268.

14. *Ibid.*, 268 and 270.

15. Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," 186.

16. *Ibid.*, 186.

17. See especially Arendt, *The Human Condition*; and Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 1963). The basic outline given here appears in similar but not identical form in the work of a range of scholars, including Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation of Her Political*

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argued that a person emerges in the public realm in a general sense whenever he or she takes a position on an effort or issue common to a group of people that both “relates ... and separates” them at the same time. Over time, as each participant makes his or her own unique contribution, members come to see this common point of contact from multiple perspectives. In Arendt’s words, the components of this common project “must be seen in a variety of aspects without changing their identity, so that those who are gathered around them know they see sameness in utter diversity” (*HC*, 57). This creates a kind of “space,” brought into being by the multiplicity of understandings of each participant. Within this space, common action is possible — not as a “mass,” but through an unpredictable collaboration among equals. “Power,” for Arendt, is created through action “in concert” in this public realm where each participant is neither autonomous nor simply a cog in a machine, but rather forms part of a collective that generates an immense force for unpredictable change (*HC*, 180, 201). One acts among others who respond in ways that one cannot predict, and this action then begins a process of myriad, partially responsive actions that reverberate through the world.

In the ideal, participants act in part out of a “love for the world” (*HC*, 322), for the objects and ideas they have inherited from the past and to which they are, through their actions, contributing. For it is only this ongoing world, in which people take up specific positions, that allows a rich public to emerge at all. (This is the “world” that Arendt wanted children to be introduced to in school.)¹⁸ As she noted later on, a public space appears “spontaneously” whenever people come together around a common “world” of this kind.

This is a public realm built fundamentally around dialogue, because without speech someone cannot “appear” in such a unique location. Even in what Arendt described as the essentially *proto*-political space of action on the battlefield during the Trojan War in the *Iliad*, the hero “Achilles can be understood only if one sees him as the ‘doer of great deeds and the speaker of great words’” (*HC*, 25, emphasis added). She explained how the Greeks later separated such action from the violent theater of warfare by creating the new space of the *polis* where action could consist *only* of words seeking to affect the actions of others. According to this vision, mute action is not human action at all because it does not reveal the “who” behind the action.

In this way, action is linked to Arendt’s vision of “judgment.” The political actor must listen deeply to the words of others and only contributes his or her own actions in response to the perspectives they present. “Political thought,” Arendt argued, “is representative. I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints,” taking into account these utterly unique perspectives

Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Aaron Schutz, “Creating Local ‘Public Spaces’ in Schools: Insights from Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (1999): 77–98; and Greene, “Public Education and the Public Space.”

18. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 188–189.

presented by the others in a public space.¹⁹ A public actor, in the best sense, then, is an understanding person or "*phronimos*,"²⁰ one who listens to the perspectives of others and then acts after taking them into account. Only in cases when people are listening to each other in this manner can it be said that a public realm, in the sense described by Arendt in *The Human Condition*, has truly come into being.

THE PUBLIC IN "THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION"

Although "Little Rock" and "Crisis" were published around the same time as *The Human Condition*, on close examination we find some tensions between the visions of "public" action these different works present.

Arendt said that the "point of departure" for her "Little Rock" essay, which later precipitated her "Crisis" essay, came when she saw

a picture in the newspapers showing a Negro girl on her way home from a newly integrated school. She was persecuted by a mob of white children, protected by a white friend of her father, and her face bore eloquent witness to the obvious fact that she was not precisely happy. The picture showed the situation in a nutshell because those who appeared in it were directly affected by the Federal Court order, the children themselves. My first question was: what would I do if I were a Negro mother? The answer: under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted.²¹

She believed the person in the picture to be Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine.²² As Arendt noted in the original essay, "the girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero."²³

But Arendt's description of Eckford's position as one of a "hero" diverged significantly from heroism as defined in *The Human Condition*. In that work, the hero is one who speaks. In Eckford's case, however, there was not speech but instead a picture. Eckford herself did not speak at that point, but was surrounded by the speech of others, speech that said much about her action and little about "who" she was. The students involved, including Eckford, did eventually speak — often quite eloquently — about their reasoning behind their actions. But amid the furor of the times, embedded within the larger narrative of (usually white) reporters, it

19. Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in *Between Past and Future*, 241. She was talking about representing the perspectives of those who are "absent" in this section, as she often was when talking about judgment, but this same process is clearly implied in the work of the political actor.

20. Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 75.

21. Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Critics," *Dissent* 6, no. 2 (1959): 179.

22. Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014). Gines argues that Arendt misinterpreted the picture, which actually depicted a different girl altogether. This point will be discussed in greater depth subsequently; however, for the purposes of our argument, what is important is that Arendt believed that the photo was of Eckford.

23. Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," 50.

is hard to think that their voices were able to define their own “positions” within the public realm.²⁴

Arendt’s own act of political judgment seemed similarly divergent from her vision of perspective taking as presented in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere. She took the position not of a unique individual, but instead of an imagined (and, as it turned out, not *well* imagined) generalized other. She tried to speak “as if I were a Negro mother.” Yet, as Kathryn Gines notes, there is no evidence that she made any effort to speak with or to ascertain the perspective of any actual African American parents. As Ralph Ellison later stated, Arendt had “absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their kids through those lines of hostile parents.” These parents, he stressed,

are aware of the overtones of a rite of initiation which such events actually constitute for the child. . . . And in the outlook of many of these parents (who wish that the problem didn’t exist), the child is expected to face the terror and contain his fear and anger precisely because he is a Negro American. Thus he’s required to master the inner tensions created by his racial situation, and if he gets hurt — then his is one more sacrifice.²⁵

Arendt later acknowledged privately to Ellison that she had not understood this aspect of the thinking of many African American parents.²⁶ As Gines shows, however, many of her other assumptions about the decisions the parents made were factually incorrect.

Arendt should have made a greater effort to understand. But her position was similar to that of most white Americans for whom the actual voices and perspectives of the parents and the children who underwent this experience were not front and center. In truth, for Arendt’s purposes in analyzing the famous photographs documenting school desegregation, Eckford could have been a different black woman. Ironically, Gines argues that Arendt was actually looking at the wrong photograph: she thought she was seeing Eckford when the picture she described in her “Little Rock” essay was actually of a different woman integrating a school in a different state.²⁷

24. For a detailed account of these events, see Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, the Crisis that Shocked the Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2007); David Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). For discussion of Arendt’s analysis of these events, see especially Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*; and Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Actually, in the media there were multiple if overlapping public realms, with the African American media such as the *Arkansas State Press* reporting to a different audience and from a different perspective than the *New York Times*, for example. See Clint C. Wilson, *Whither the Black Press? Glorious Past, Uncertain Future* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2014), 112.

25. Ralph Ellison, interview by Robert Penn Warren; see Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (1965; repr. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 344.

26. See Elizabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 316. Arendt wrote that “it is precisely this ideal of sacrifice which I didn’t understand.”

27. Gines reports that the newspaper Arendt said she was responding to (*New York Times*, September 5, 1957) actually contained two photos: one depicting Elizabeth Eckford being blocked from Central High

If Eckford was a “hero,” then it was a kind of hero very different from the public actor Arendt described in *The Human Condition*. It was a largely mute heroism, the action of a representative, relatively interchangeable, if brave, young black woman standing up for her rights.²⁸

Danielle Allen usefully extends on Ellison’s comment that actions like Eckford’s are ones of sacrifice as part of a struggle for solidarity.²⁹ This is not the place to go into Allen’s theory of sacrifice in detail. However, it is clear that Eckford is both acting for herself in this context — striving to get a better education — and presenting herself as a representative sacrifice in an effort to change the world, to make it a better place. She was standing up for her own rights, but also, by association, for the rights of her oppressed group more broadly. As an African American woman in this context, she was simply not allowed to be “only” an individual. She knew that her actions would reflect on all black people more generally. The “public” she entered in Little Rock was not one of dialogue, where unique individuals were working together for the common good. It was a space of potential violence and collective struggle, where the perspectives of individuals were simply unimportant compared to the group conflicts taking place, where one faced the “merciless glare” of a public realm — a public that, instead of enhancing individuality, tended to dissolve it.

FRIENDSHIP AND THE POLITICAL

Despite her tendency to strictly distinguish between public and private, in her discussion of friendship Arendt acknowledged that there are aspects of the private that can be conducive to the emergence of relationships more characteristic of those found in public spaces. In “Philosophy and Politics,” specifically, her exemplar of public engagement was talking “something through” as an engagement between friends.

“Friendship,” she noted, to a large extent “consists of this kind of talking about something that the friends have in common. By talking about what is between them, it becomes ever more common to them. It ... develops and expands and finally, in the course of time and life, begins to constitute a little world of its

School by National Guard troops, and the other showing “Dorothy Counts and Dr. Edwin Tompkins surrounded by ‘jeering’ white students while walking toward (not away from) Harding High School in Charlotte, North Carolina.” Gines notes that in Arendt’s statement about the girl who was being a hero, she “mistakenly describes the photo of Counts in Charlotte rather than the one of Eckford in Little Rock” (16).

28. Interestingly, Eckford resented Daisy Bates, president of the NAACP in Arkansas, because she thought Bates was using the students to serve the NAACP’s purposes. At the same time, however, Eckford clearly understood her position as a representative of other African Americans. Despite suffering “disproportionately” at the hands of white students at Central, Eckford continued on because her leaving would be a powerful symbol given her fame, Margolick reports. He notes that “how she saw it was” that “black America was at war ... and Elizabeth was doing her soldierly duty” (Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel*, 129 and 134).

29. Allen, *Talking to Strangers*.

own which is shared."³⁰ In other words, Arendt argued here that the openness to different perspectives that occurs when friends speak to each other in this particular way seems to inevitably create a common world. It creates a small public realm.

She went on to argue that friendship — this kind of “political, noneconomic equalization” — *is actually* “the bond of communities.” When friends “become equal partners,” they learn “how and in what specific articulateness the common world appears to the other, who as a person is forever unequal or different.”³¹ She extended on this in an unpublished lecture she gave at the University of California at Berkeley: “If I want to understand” another person, “I must know from which point of view he sees things. ... I must imagine the world from his point of location.” This requires, she noted, a particular form of “political imagination.”³²

As part of this argument, Arendt described the efforts of Socrates to improve the opinions (*doxa*) of young Athenians through one-on-one questioning by friends to make their own truths more apparent to them. Arendt proposed that, by adopting this intimate approach to improving the political opinions of these young men, Socrates was attempting to infuse a sense of friendship that was generally missing in the contested, competitive terrain of the Athenian *polis* that ultimately became too antagonistic to sustain itself. While friends as individual persons are not equal or the same, through friendship “they become equal partners in a common world — ... they together constitute a community.”³³

Arendt stressed the uniquely political implications of these friendships and indicated that these bonds Socrates sought to cultivate would lead to public actions to better support the common good. If people were articulate enough in communicating the truth of how the world opens to them through these friendly connections (their opinions or *doxa*), there could be rule among citizens without relying upon leaders. She wrote,

the political element in friendship is that in the truthful dialogue each of the friends can understand the truth inherent in the other's position. ... This kind of understanding — seeing the world (as we rather tritely say today) from the other fellow's point of view — is the political kind of insight *par excellence*.³⁴

30. Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 82.

31. *Ibid.*, 83.

32. Hannah Arendt, “Political Science 110A: Contemporary Issues,” an unpublished syllabus and lectures given at the University of California, Berkeley, 1955; Hannah Arendt Papers, Library of Congress, Box 45, p. 4. See similar statements in Arendt, “Truth and Politics”; and in Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). Also see Arendt's discussion of the relationship between friendship and politics in her essay on Lessing: Hannah Arendt, “On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing,” in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955); and Lisa Disch, “On Friendship in ‘Dark Times,’” in *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt*, ed. Honig, 285–312.

33. Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics,” 83.

34. *Ibid.*, 89.

In fact, the kind of interpersonal knowledge that emerges through dialogue in friendship seems critical to the emergence of broader publics. If you don't know anything about the person with whom you are speaking, how are you to understand what they are saying? How will you be able to understand the unique perspective from which their words emerge? (For this reason, Arendt was clear that public spaces must be relatively small, lest they collapse into engagements between collectives instead of unique individuals.)³⁵

Arendt's discussion of friendship blurs the strict line drawn elsewhere between "public" and "private." Any time people are led to really listen to each other, to truly understand the perspective of another on some common object or issue, it seems that they necessarily create a public realm for themselves. In some ways, in fact, this seems to be the most "authentic" form of the public, only partially approximated by more formally political public spaces where people may not know each other's perspectives as well.

COMPLICATING ARENDT'S VISION OF THE "PUBLIC"

While Arendt tended to draw fairly stark distinctions between different ways of being — between public and private, for example — in this case we are *not* arguing for a new set of blunt distinctions. Instead, we find what seems to be a continuum between the conflictual space in which Eckford found herself — a space that we call, following Arendt, the "public stage" — and more dialogic public arenas. On one side, we have contexts where people engage in sacrifice and operate as part of collectives in sometimes titanic conflicts over the nature of the world that we will live in.³⁶ On the other side, we have Arendt's ideal of the "dialogic public" that is perhaps best achieved in the context of friendship — an experience of listening and dialogue about the world that is surely only partially achieved in the agonistic space of the *polis*.³⁷ We use Arendt's term "world" intentionally here, for she included in the objects of our common world the laws that define what is and is not allowed — whether, for example, black children will be allowed to attend formerly all-white schools. The kind of realm Eckford acted within is not a realistic space for dialogues built on the model of friendship.

35. In *On Revolution*, for example, Arendt envisions a pyramid of small publics, each reporting up toward the top while also maintaining within the individual level the "friendship" relationships that allow sufficient understanding (278).

36. This is different from Seyla Benhabib's discussion of the "agonal" and "narrative" conceptions of public action in Arendt. See Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, 127.

37. See Kathleen Knight Abowitz, who lays out a similar distinction between "community organizing" and "deliberative politics" in *Publics for Public Schools: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Leadership* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2013). Knight Abowitz goes much deeper into the implications of this tension than we can here. See also Darwyn Fehrman and Aaron Schutz, "Beyond the Catch-22 of School-Based Social Action Programs: Toward a More Pragmatic Approach for Dealing with Power," *Democracy and Education* 19, no. 1 (2011): article three; accessed November 14, 2014, <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol19/iss1/3/>.

It is useful at this point to examine the way that Arendt used the metaphor of “masks” in different places in her writings. On the one hand, in one of her most cherished examples in the prologue of *Between Past and Future*, Arendt told the story of the realm of dialogue, hidden from the Nazis, that emerged among French Resistance fighters in Nazi-occupied France. They created a space where they could talk and act “in this nakedness, *stripped of all masks* — of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psychological reactions against society.”³⁸ In contrast to this vision of the public as a place where masks are put aside, in her Sonning Prize acceptance speech, Arendt spoke of the act of appearing as a “‘public figure’ for the purpose of a public event” as a moment when she put on a mask. She stated that it is on the public “stage” where we must wear “*the masks or roles which the world assigns us, and which we must accept and even acquire if we wish to take part in the world’s play at all.*”³⁹

Here we have a distinction between the public realm of deliberative “friendship,” a realm of relative trust where one can reveal oneself in one’s “nakedness,” and the public “stage,” a realm where one must put on masks in order to address the “public” and where much of one’s uniqueness must be left behind in order for one to take on a role. Both seem public, but they are different kinds of public realms. Masks are banned from one, required in the other.

Further, there are places in Arendt’s work where a continuum of participation in different kinds of publics is implied. In the case of the French Resistance, for example, the members appeared to each other in their uniqueness in their hidden spaces, but, of course, they had to leave behind their uniqueness whenever they moved out of these hidden spaces to engage with the Nazis. More broadly, this kind of movement is reflected in Arendt’s discussions of the Greek *polis*. Decisions about war were made in dialogue, but once war was declared, participants in the *polis* entered the military, which operated hierarchically, dividing citizens into groups of leaders and followers (*HC*, 26). In cases of war, therefore, other cities were no longer treated as dialogic partners, and citizens who had once discussed war in the *polis* came together behind their roles or masks in the military as soldiers.

One can trace a rough continuum ranging from intimate spaces where one has no common project and is as open as possible to others, to the stage of warfare where people have ceased to engage in dialogue at all. In the private realm, at least according to Arendt’s ideal vision, people lack coherent common

38. Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 4 (emphasis added).

39. Hannah Arendt, “Sonning Prize Acceptance Speech, 1975,” *Miscellaneous Material*, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://miscellaneousmaterial.blogspot.com/2011/08/hannah-arendt-sonning-prize-acceptance.html>. This speech is also published as the prologue in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 3–16 (quotes on 13–14, emphasis added). See also Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, 106–107.

projects that separate them. They emerge within the public realm when they have some common project they are working on, which can be as simple as a topic of conversation among friends. In this early “purest” form of the public, while one emerges “without masks,” as in the French Resistance example, one is still limited by the need for one’s contributions to be “relevant” to the project a group is working on (*HC*, 51). Even in public dialogue between friends, Arendt noted, “courage” is required because of the obligation to say what one sees from one’s perspective, having listened to others in that space, even if what one says is not what others want to hear. This is the courage of a *collaborative* “hero” that is “in fact already present in a willingness to speak and act at all, to insert one’s self into the world. ... [C]ourage and even boldness are already present in leaving one’s private hiding place and showing who one is, in disclosing and exposing one’s self” (*HC*, 186).

The example of the Greek *polis* moves us somewhat farther along this continuum, in that the *polis* was (at least in the imagination of the Greeks) designed to continue the heroism of the Trojan War by other means (*HC*, 198). As we noted previously, Arendt’s Socrates worried about the survival of the *polis* under the pressure of extreme contention. One who participates in a *polis*-like space of verbal conflict is likely to be wearing more of a mask than one who is speaking with friends. It is a space where, at least in part, one is trying to “persuade” others of the rightness of one’s own perspective. Interestingly, Arendt believed that “to persuade the multitude means to force upon its multiple opinions one’s own opinion,” thus “persuasion is not the opposite of rule by violence, it is only another form of it.”⁴⁰ Yet some core level of self-revealing (to oneself and to others) is still necessary in such spaces; otherwise, they dissolve into a realm only of masks, hidden interests, and “public opinion” separated from individuals’ actual experiences in the world, as happens too often in our own political system. Under such conditions, true politics, according to Arendt’s definition, disappears. Telling the truth as one sees it often clashes with established public opinion or the interests of potential supporters, which, of course, would endanger the positions of politicians and others, leading to the invasion of politics by the collective private interests of what Arendt called the “social.”⁴¹ In fact, this possibility is one reason she was uncomfortable with representative democracy unmitigated by broader grassroots participation in politics.⁴²

Finally, the case of Elizabeth Eckford pushes us to the extreme end of the continuum: here, we leave behind the realm of public collaboration, however conflictual. Eckford’s courage inhered in her willingness to appear on the public

40. Arendt, “Truth and Politics,” 79.

41. See Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics,” in *Crises of the Republic* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972). On the social, Arendt noted that “the arena of public affairs ... is equally riddled with private interests”; see Hannah Arendt, “Freedom and Politics,” in *Freedom and Serfdom: An Anthology of Western Thought*, ed. Albert Hunold (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 1961), 200.

42. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*.

stage wearing her mask, accepting the sacrifice that came with her action. While she was able to speak, the context made it almost impossible for her to be heard.

It is important to acknowledge that while we believe that the distinctions we are drawing are visible in different places in her writings, Arendt herself would surely have resisted it. Her mature writings were driven by her fear of a politics dictated by social roles in which we fail to take individual responsibility for our actions and stop seeing each other as unique individuals (as exemplified by Adolf Eichmann, who asserted that his role in Nazi Germany's bureaucracy justified his facilitation of the death of countless innocents). In addition, Arendt decried the failure of the American Revolution to maintain the spirit of revolution when it devolved into a representative democracy where the people lost any sense of the public happiness of friendship-like dialogic politics and became merely voters a few times a year.⁴³ More generally, beginning with her first famous book, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which emerged out of her experiences in Nazi Germany, Arendt railed against the dangers of "the mass" of people who acted — for different reasons — as if they were collectives and lost their own individuality as a result.⁴⁴

In moments such as the one faced by the Little Rock Nine, however, it is not surprising that Arendt's ideal of the collaborative public seems to break down. In such contexts, we cannot do less than put on our masks. The space in the streets of that time was not one of dialogic engagement; instead, it serves as an example of the *failure* of such a space to emerge.

TEACHING PUBLIC CITIZENSHIP

Having explored Arendt's vision of the "public" in some detail, we are now ready to return to the starting point of this essay: What can we say about the implications of the argument we have developed here for teaching public citizenship in schools?

The different "poles" of public engagement seem to have different implications for children in schools. The more "dialogic" approach to public citizenship seems compatible with schools by and large. Arendt emphasized, however, that even this approach entails complications and dangers. Cases in which dialogue becomes increasingly contentious, for instance, would have made her uncomfortable. Of greater concern still for Arendt is what happens when we move out of more dialogic spaces and onto the public stage, where we encounter a much more complicated set of challenges.

LEARNING DIALOGIC CITIZENSHIP IN SCHOOLS

In terms of "teaching" dialogic public engagement, it is important to acknowledge that Arendt tended to describe the emergence of a public space as something

43. Ibid.

44. Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, new ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968).

that seems almost instinctual and natural — that is, as something that “happens” to people, not a practice that must be learned.⁴⁵ But what Arendt described as a discussion among “friends” is not necessarily “natural.” Some people do not (learn to) really listen to each other. That is why, in her essay “Philosophy and Politics,” Arendt emphasized that Socrates was trying to *teach* young Athenians how to listen and speak with one another through friendly connections, a process designed to help improve their public opinions — and therefore their public actions. This type of political education involves learning a *dialectical* form of listening and speaking. By “thinking things through” with another, an individual is able to understand one’s own position more fully, and therefore one’s opinion becomes more truthful. The different forms of listening, as Socrates knew, constitute learned practices — a point explored, for example, in a recent symposium in *Educational Theory*⁴⁶ — even if the roots of these practices lie in the core capacities for listening and perspective taking that are, in more general terms, the inheritance of all human beings.

When teachers engage students in understanding and taking into account the perspectives of others on a novel, a math problem, or whatever the common effort might be, they are facilitating the skills that Arendt considered requisites for the emergence of a public space, *and* they are thereby creating mini-public spaces. In this way, they are teaching and engaging students in a particular kind of political practice — perhaps the most important political skill of all.

To extend on this point, Arendt was clear in her writings that efforts by philosophers such as Plato to find an overall “truth” that should rule the *polis* and thereby collapse the various perspectives of different citizens together are extremely dangerous.⁴⁷ For the public to be sustained, students must cultivate an understanding that each participant sees and comprehends the world in different ways based on the unique physiological and historical differences they bring with them to the task. Teaching children about the “world” in a non-Platonic way will inevitably encourage students to present their own perspectives on what is being discussed. And when one encourages unique perspectives to emerge within the give-and-take of dialogue, as in friendship, the public inevitably “bubbles up” at the same time. Unavoidably, then, when teachers help children develop their own perspectives on the “world” that they are going to inherit, they are constantly involving them in forms of “public” engagement.

Yet, Arendt would strictly limit how far along the “public” continuum teachers are allowed to move, something we resist. She might accept comfortable, safe

45. See Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 5.

46. Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and Megan J. Laverty, eds., “Symposium: Philosophical Perspectives on Listening,” *Educational Theory* 61, no. 2 (2011). See also, for example, Jim Garrison, “A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening,” *Educational Theory* 46, no. 4 (1996): 429–451; and Suzanne Rice and Nicholas C. Burbules, “Listening: A Virtue Account,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 11 (2010): 2728–2742.

47. See, for example, Arendt, “Philosophy and Politics.”

dialogues, where the “light” of the public is not too bright. But, as Arendt understood, it often requires courage to enter the public. A coauthor of this essay, Marie Sandy, recalls one of her high school classes in which the teacher asked students to divide into two groups, one advocating for gun control and one opposing it. Sandy was the only person who chose the pro-gun control group, and she did not feel particularly safe or comfortable defending her position in this context. Outside of contrived debate arenas where adults typically serve as arbiters or judges, however, real-world public action can evoke both physical and verbal violence, and it is here that Arendt’s arguments about the dangers of the “bright light” of the public seem especially relevant. Even in the realm of dialogue, even when there is some effort to achieve collaboration, participating in public dialogue entails danger, unpredictable danger (since one never knows how others in the public space may react when one presents one’s perspectives). It is possible for students to experience the violence of having their views infringed upon by others, and the need to defend their position. One can see how premature engagement in spaces such as these can lead students to suppress their own perspectives in order to maintain their social relationships. As Arendt notes, “the authority of a ... child group” is very strong,⁴⁸ and one wonders whether some of the other students in Sandy’s classroom actually may have supported gun control in their own way, but were unwilling to bring these beliefs into the light — and pay the price for expressing them — in that context.

Nonetheless, we would argue that it is important for teachers to provide contexts where students learn to risk themselves in this way, that it is possible to expose students to at least aspects of the “bright light” of the more conflictual pole of the dialogic realm. This requires going beyond manufactured debate settings, where people are instructed to take a given side regardless of their own beliefs, and moving toward contexts such as the one Sandy describes, where students learn to express their own unique perspectives and to experience some of the consequences that come with doing so. Sarah Stitzlein has shown how important experiences of this sort are for educating engaged democratic citizens. In her book *Teaching for Dissent*, she both notes the limited extent to which students in schools generally engage with questions like this, and examines a range of ways that teachers might go about the difficult work of creating these experiences.⁴⁹ On this point, our argument with Arendt is one of degree, of how far to push children into the “light” that shines on any revelation of their unique perspectives, an issue that teachers should be encouraged to struggle with more directly.

TEACHING CHILDREN TO ACT ON THE PUBLIC STAGE

The Little Rock example takes us beyond arenas of dialogue. In Allen’s terms, the Little Rock Nine entered the realm of sacrifice, where they wore “masks” of a

48. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 181.

49. Sarah M. Stitzlein, *Teaching for Dissent: Citizenship Education and the Political* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

sort in acting as representatives of a larger group, although clearly this sacrifice still represented an effort to persuade.⁵⁰ Against Arendt, we believe it is important that we work to find ways to address teaching for the public stage so that children will be better prepared to engage in public action, to emerge from dialogic collaboration into the realm beyond it, where the most intense struggles over what really matters in our society take place. It is important to acknowledge that acting on the public stage is surely as much of a learned practice as dialogic citizenship. We build “civic muscle” by participating in political spaces.⁵¹ Nonetheless, it is here that Arendt’s arguments about the dangers of the “bright light” of the public seem most relevant. Parents, such as those in Little Rock, may be able to allow their children to enter dangerous spaces, but teachers surely cannot.

The “public stage” for Arendt as we understand it, however, represents a fairly wide spectrum of possible activities, ranging from efforts to convince the school administration that a particular point of view is correct, to actions such as those of the Little Rock Nine, and stopping at the stage of warfare where efforts to “persuade” largely disappear. Some aspects of participation on the public stage seem relatively easy to imagine in a school setting while others are quite challenging to conceive. How exactly to do this, and how far schools or other institutions that serve children outside schools (such as community organizing groups) can ethically push in the direction of the kind of experiences that Eckford and others had in Little Rock goes beyond what we can address in this essay. Schutz has elsewhere explored how students might be initiated into aspects of the skills and knowledge for engaging in more overt social action, even in schools, in ways that go significantly farther than Arendt would have recommended.⁵²

LEARNING THE CONTINUUM OF PUBLIC ACTION

Beyond understanding how to act in dialogic spaces and on the public stage, we believe it is important for students to *understand* that this continuum exists in the first place. There has long been a desire among progressive educators to equate political action with dialogic engagement, something visible in Arendt’s work as well.⁵³ But the Eckford example shows us that the public stage is an important aspect of citizenship, and that it is not the same as participation in a collaborative project, however contentious that process might become. When students are not

50. In his essay “Human Conditions for Teaching,” Chris Higgins similarly uses Jackie Robinson as an example of this kind of persuasion. Interestingly, those assisting the Little Rock Nine often used Robinson as an example of how the students needed to act, and the media drew this comparison as well (see Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel*, 29).

51. Harry Boyte, *Reinventing Citizenship: The Practice of Public Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

52. Fehrman and Schutz, “Beyond the Catch-22 of School-Based Social Action Programs.”

53. See Aaron Schutz, *Social Class, Social Action, and Education: The Failure of Progressive Democracy* (New York: Palgrave, 2011).

helped to overcome this popular tendency to equate collaborative dialogue and political engagement as a whole, they are not being prepared for the realities of citizenship in a democratic society.⁵⁴

There are clearly ways to achieve this in schools. For example, Stitzlein shows how analyzing the realities and complexities of stories of political engagement — such as those from the civil rights movement — can play an important role in helping students to recognize and understand this continuum. For this approach to be successful, however, teachers themselves need to learn to teach these moments in more complex ways that emphasize the different kinds of engagement visible in such stories across the continuum from the dialogic to the public stage, and that resist efforts to describe movements of this sort as examples of “dialogue.”

LEARNING POLITICAL SKILLS VERSUS POLITICIZATION

To conclude, let us return to the essay in which Arendt established her strict distinction between schooling and public engagement: “The Crisis in Education.” As noted previously, based in part on her experience with the Hitler Youth in Germany, Arendt saw overt attempts to mobilize children and youth politically as destructive to “authentic politics.”⁵⁵ Whether or not her analogy between the Hitler Youth of Nazi Germany and the Little Rock Nine’s participation in the civil rights movement was correct (and, as noted previously, she did seem to change her mind about this to some limited extent in her letter to Ellison), it seems at least plausible that in “Crisis” Arendt’s purpose was not to oppose *any* public engagement in classrooms, but was specifically to contest pushing students too far along the continuum into the “bright light” of the dialogic realm and especially onto the “public stage.” She particularly stressed the oppressive politicization of intense moments of political domination and conflict. It is only when, as she said in “Crisis,” the light of the public is “blinding” that it becomes dangerous to children (and certainly many of the children in the conflict over school desegregation, especially Eckford, paid a psychic price for their actions).⁵⁶ Arendt did not see this distinction herself because her framework did not allow her to see what we have argued here is a continuum across her division between public and private. In part because she did not acknowledge this continuum, Arendt never addressed how much “light” would be too much for children to bear, but we believe this issue is an important one for the field to examine in more detail.

To the extent that children become “friends” with each other, that they have discussions in classrooms about the common world they are encountering through the curriculum and their broader experiences, they are frequently creating small deliberative “publics” among themselves. And to the extent that such engagement

54. Also see Levinson, “‘But Some People Will Not’: Arendtian Interventions in Education.”

55. See Elshtain, “Political Children,” 270.

56. See Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel*.

is learned — that is, to the extent that we learn how to listen and how to present ourselves — education in the skills of this kind “public” engagement, even from an Arendtian perspective, seems critical in schools, with teachers pushing students to take risks in more contentious spaces. The issue of teaching for the public stage is much more difficult to solve, but we would argue, against Arendt, that it is important that we work to find ways to address it so that children will be better prepared to act on the public stage, to emerge from relatively safe spaces for dialogic collaboration into the “bright light” of the realm beyond those spaces, for this is where some of the most significant struggles in our society take place.

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